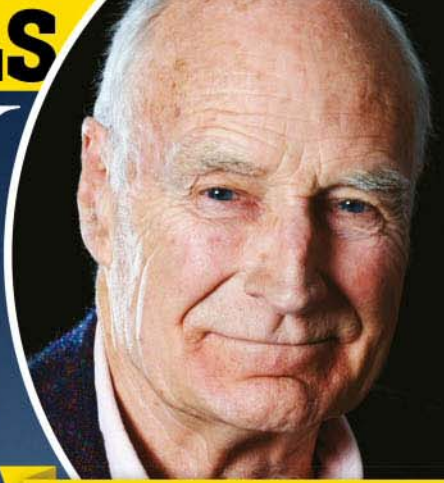


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HISTORY *of* WAR

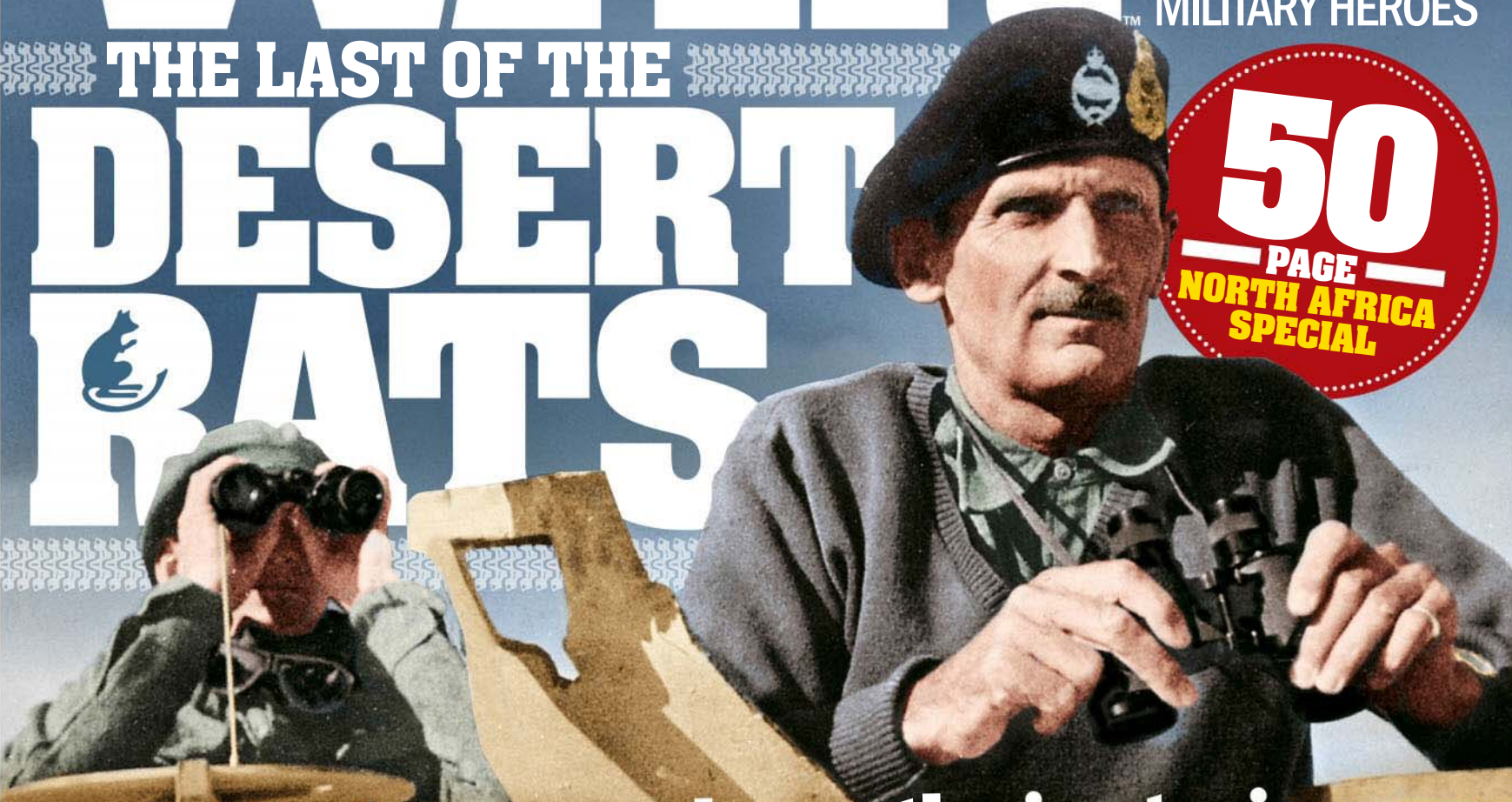


PETER SNOW

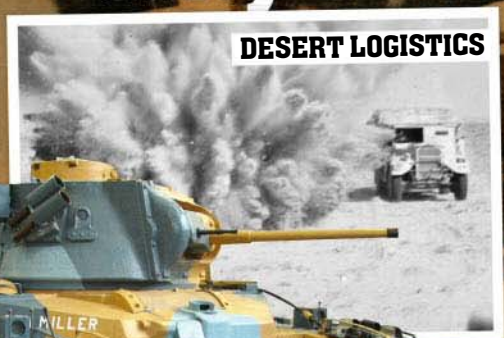
HONOURING HIS MILITARY HEROES

THE LAST OF THE DESERT RATS

50
PAGE
NORTH AFRICA
SPECIAL



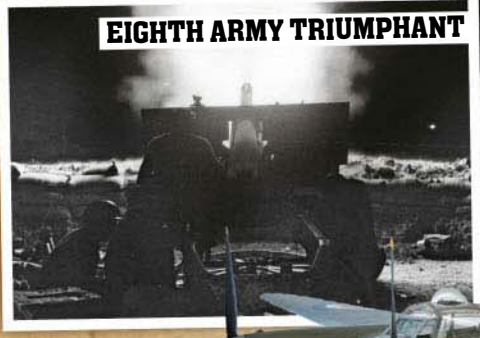
Monty's heroes share their stories



DESERT LOGISTICS



HUNTING FOR ROMMEL'S HQ



EIGHTH ARMY TRIUMPHANT



EL ALAMEIN

WAS AUCHINLECK THE REAL ARCHITECT OF VICTORY IN AFRICA?

DH MOSQUITO

THE QUEST TO RESTORE BRITAIN'S LEGENDARY FIGHTER-BOMBER



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KING & COUNTRY'S

TARAWA

USMC011



USMC016

THE BATTLE OF TARAWA was fought between 20-23 November 1943 and was part of the U.S. invasion of the Gilbert Islands in the central Pacific region.

The assault on the *Tarawa Atoll* was the first time that U.S. forces faced serious opposition to an amphibious landing. On tiny Tarawa more than **4,500 Japanese defenders** were well supplied and dug-in and fought virtually to the last man.

Opposing them were the men of the **2nd Marine Division, United States Marine Corps**, some of America's toughest and best fighting men.

CASUALTIES & LOSSES

Of the roughly 12,000 *Marines* who landed on Tarawa 3,146 became casualties with almost **1,000** being killed and over **2,000** wounded... in just 76 hours of brutal and bloody non-stop combat.

U.S. War Correspondent **Robert Sherrod** who was on Tarawa with the Marines later wrote, "Last week some 2,000 or 3,000 United States Marines, most of them now dead or wounded, gave the nation a name to stand beside Concord Bridge... the Alamo... Little Bighorn... and Belleau Wood... The name was Tarawa!"

USMC013



USMC012



SEMPER PARATI... DO OR DIE!

KING & COUNTRY'S Cofounder & Creative Director **Andy C. Neilson** is a former Royal Marine himself and has a very fond affection for the 'Royal's' American 'cousins-in-arms' *The United States Marine Corps*.

Over the years K&C has produced many U.S. Marines both on parade... and in action. These latest marines are the best, most dynamic ones yet!

10 dramatic, 'in-action' Marines are fighting their way off the beach at Tarawa in this first release (more are already in development).

As riflemen provide cover-fire a wounded Marine is dragged to safety... Nearby another Marine with a flame thrower prepares to do his worst while one

USMC014



USMC015



USMC020



USMC022



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Welcome

“The whole horizon was lit up by these guns behind us, which put down a creeping barrage. It was 200 yards in front of us, so as we advanced the barrage advanced”

– Piper James Simpson, D Company, Fifth Btn, The Black Watch

In the North African desert, 75 years ago, a pivotal battle raged between Montgomery’s Eighth Army and Axis coalition forces led by Erwin Rommel. As part of this special issue of **History of War**, we’re pleased to present 50 pages dedicated to the Western Desert Campaign, including the late James Simpson’s first-hand experiences leading his comrades into the Second Battle of El Alamein.

Elsewhere historian Rob Schäfer explores what it was like for the men of the Afrika Korps fighting in the harsh desert environment. Also in this issue, John Sadler questions whether

General Claude Auchinleck’s successful defence at El Alamein in July 1942 deserves the real credit for turning the tide in favour of the Allies.



Tim

Tim Williamson
Editor



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CONTRIBUTORS



TOM GARNER

This issue Tom had the privilege of speaking with two veterans of Britain’s WWII desert campaign, one of whom, Len Burritt, recently celebrated his 99th birthday! Read how he became the original ‘Desert Rat’ over on page 56.



WILLIAM WELSH

Alexander Farnese was one of the Renaissance era’s most gifted commanders and gave rise to new innovative military tactics and doctrines. William explores how he changed the face of European warfare over on page 68.



GAVIN MORTIMER

Piper James Simpson fought on the frontline of the desert war, leading D Company, Fifth Battalion, The Black Watch. Over on page 26 Gavin shares James’s story, and his incredible first-hand experience of the Second Battle of El Alamein.

www.historyanswers.co.uk



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An Allied unit on the march in the desert near the Libyan border, 1940



THE ORIGINAL DESERT RAT

56 British veteran Len Burritt reveals his wartime experiences serving with top Desert War generals



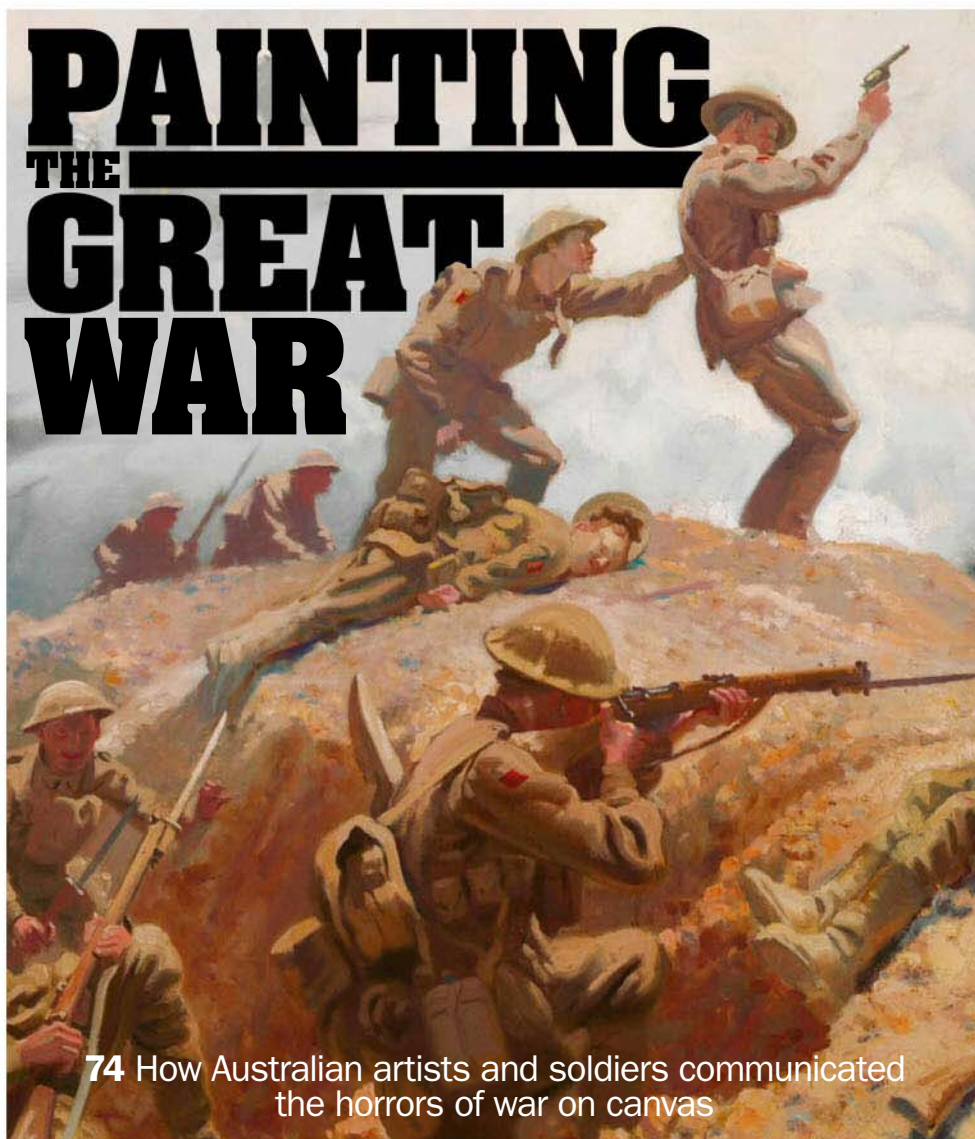
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WAR
SPECIAL**

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DE HAVILLAND DH98 MOSQUITO

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DUKE OF PARMA

68 Spain's military genius dominated the battlefields of Renaissance Europe





WARⁱⁿ FOCUS

UNCONVENTIONAL TAKEOFF

Taken: c. 1950s

A Republic F-84 Thunderjet is blasted into the air as part of a zero-length launch test in the USA. During the Cold War, the US military experimented with rocket-assisted launches for aircraft, which could enable jet fighters to take off without the use of runways, giving them a potential edge on their Soviet rivals.



WAR_{in} **FOCUS**

KOREAN SOUVENIR

Taken: c. 1871

US marines pose with a captured Korean flag during the American expedition to the peninsula in 1871. The mission was to establish diplomatic and trade relations with the obscure country, but after Korean shore batteries opened fire, the Americans launched a full-scale assault on the island of Ganghwa, overwhelming its defenders.









WARⁱⁿ FOCUS

THE RUSSIAN ARMY CAPTURING NARVA

Painted: 1956

The Siege of Narva was one of the first major actions during the Livonian War (1558-1583), during which several nations struggled for control over the vast territories of the Livonian Order, which formed much of the modern-day Baltic states.

WARⁱⁿ FOCUS

CONSULATE UNDER SIEGE

Taken: **February 1968**

American military police protect the US consulate in Saigon against a Viet Cong attack. The consulate and US embassy compound came under heavy assault during the Tet Offensive, which saw thousands of NVA and Viet Cong troops attack American and South Vietnamese positions all over the country. In the foreground lay two dead American soldiers.



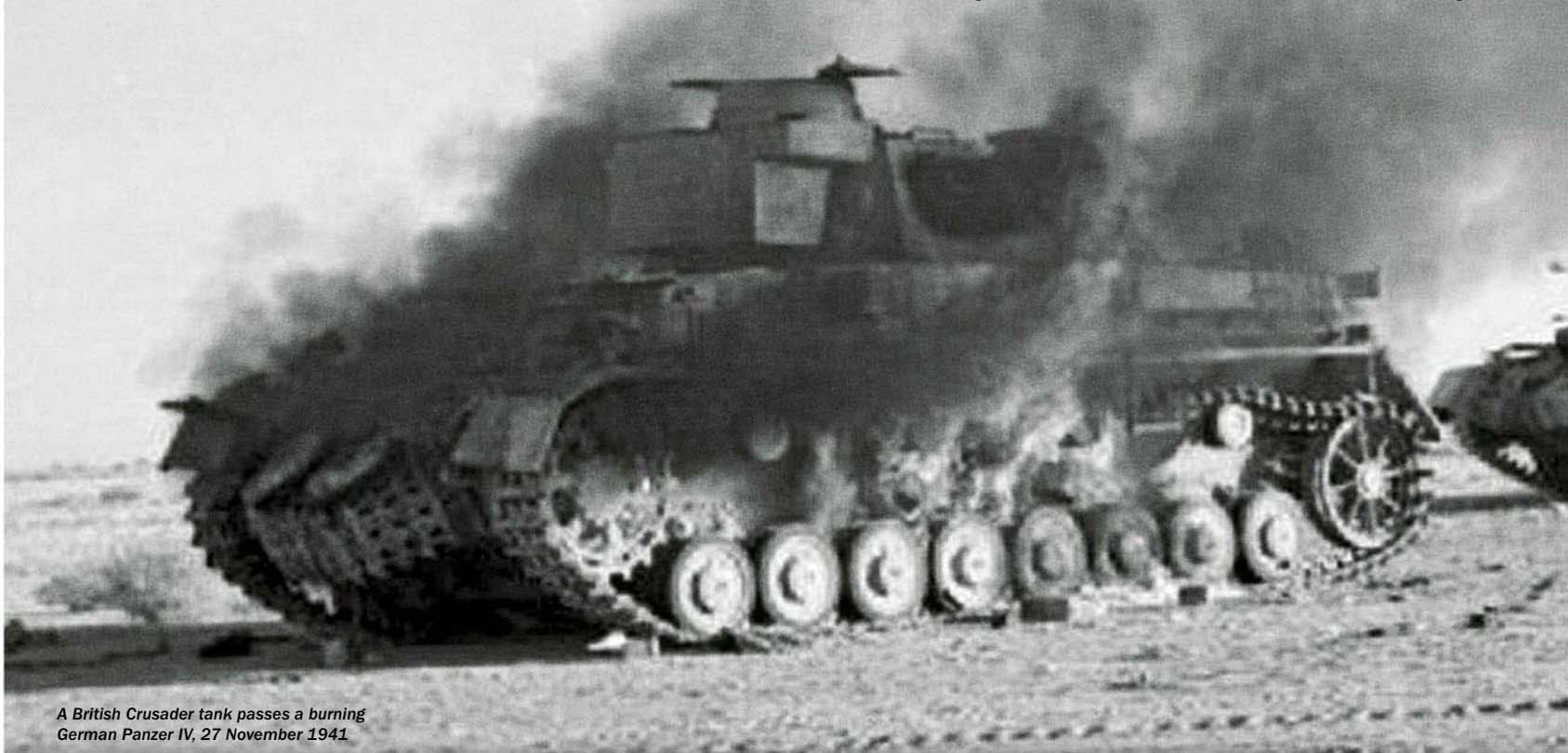


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TIMELINE OF...

THE DESERT WAR

Between 1940-1943 British-led forces fought gruelling battles and operations in North Africa to keep the Allied cause alive and lay the foundations for victory



A British Crusader tank passes a burning German Panzer IV, 27 November 1941

September-December 1940

ITALIAN INVASION OF EGYPT

Italian divisions invade Egypt, with the ultimate aim of seizing the Suez Canal from the British. Although the British are heavily outnumbered, the Italians mistakenly leave many troops in camps at Sidi Barrani and fail to capitalise on their enemy's weakness during the Battle of Britain.

Italian Fiat M13/40 tanks advance through the Egyptian desert. These new tanks had arrived in North Africa in October 1940 and had good weapons but poor engines



9 December 1940-9 February 1941

OPERATION COMPASS

The British, now reinforced with Commonwealth and Free French troops, launch their first large-scale campaign in North Africa. The Italian Tenth Army is pushed out of Egypt, Cyrenaica is seized and 130,000 prisoners are captured after the Battle of Beda Fomm.

A column of Italian prisoners marches to a British army base, 6 January 1941. Operation Compass is a hugely successful British offensive, but Winston Churchill diverts many of his forces from North Africa to defend Greece



6 February-25 May 1941

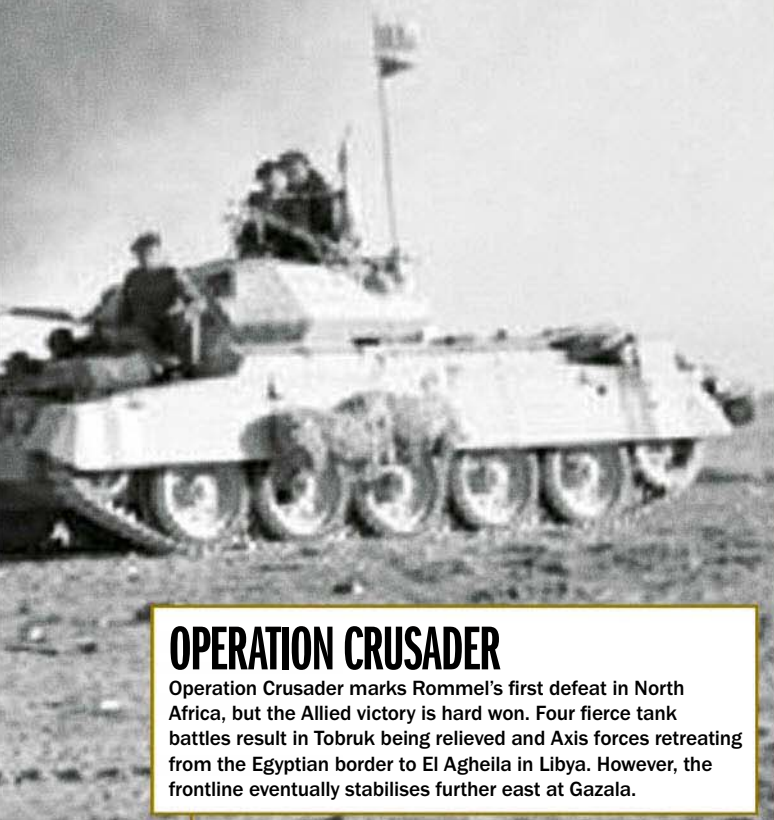
OPERATION SONNENBLUME

Adolf Hitler reinforces the reeling Italians with German divisions known as the 'Afrika Korps' under Erwin Rommel. The Germans rapidly launch an offensive, probe El Agheila, surround Tobruk, overrun Benghazi and occupy the Halfaya Pass on the Egyptian border.

German Panzer tanks pass under a marble arch as they reinforce the Italians on the Tripolitania-Cyrenaica border, 21 March 1941



“OPERATION CRUSADER MARKS ROMMEL’S FIRST DEFEAT IN NORTH AFRICA, BUT THE ALLIED VICTORY IS HARD WON”



OPERATION CRUSADER
 Operation Crusader marks Rommel’s first defeat in North Africa, but the Allied victory is hard won. Four fierce tank battles result in Tobruk being relieved and Axis forces retreating from the Egyptian border to El Agheila in Libya. However, the frontline eventually stabilises further east at Gazala.

18 November-30 December 1941

26 May-21 June 1942



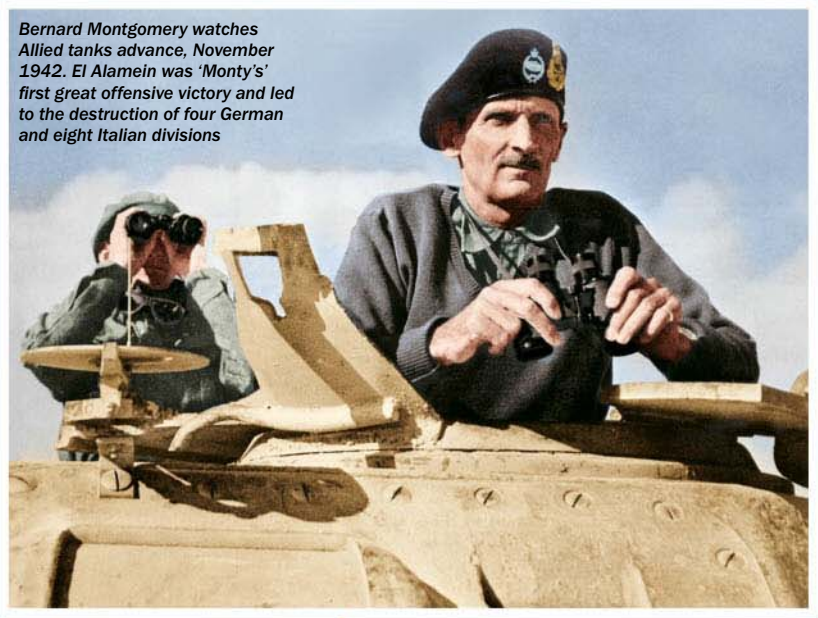
FIRST BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

In July 1942, a series of engagements south of El Alamein finally halts the advance of Rommel’s Axis forces, only 106 kilometres from Alexandria. Although the first battle is technically a stalemate, it helps lay the foundations for the decisive second battle.

Left: British infantrymen man a sandbagged defensive position near El Alamein, 17 July 1942

SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

After careful preparations by Eighth Army’s new commander Bernard Montgomery, Allied forces inflict a decisive defeat on Rommel’s forces, and the Axis forces begin an irreversible retreat out of Egypt. The battle is a huge boost to Allied morale, and Winston Churchill famously describes it as “the end of the beginning” of the war.

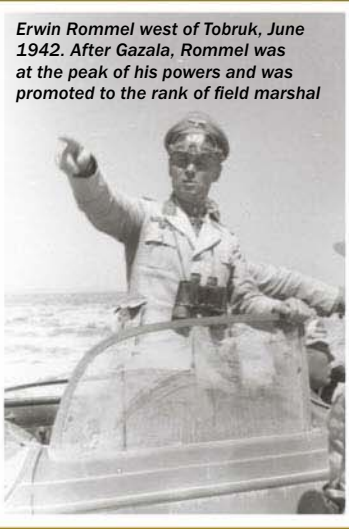


Bernard Montgomery watches Allied tanks advance, November 1942. El Alamein was ‘Monty’s’ first great offensive victory and led to the destruction of four German and eight Italian divisions

1-27 July 1942

23 October-11 November 1942

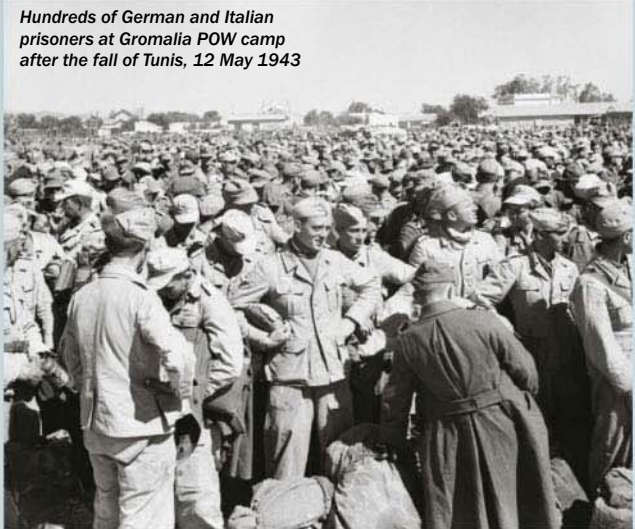
17 November 1942-9 May 1943



Erwin Rommel west of Tobruk, June 1942. After Gazala, Rommel was at the peak of his powers and was promoted to the rank of field marshal

BATTLE OF GAZALA

Gazala is Rommel’s most impressive victory in North Africa, where he forces the Allies to abandon the Gazala Line in Libya and retreat towards Egypt. In its aftermath the fiercely contested Siege of Tobruk finally ends when 35,000 Allied troops surrender.



Hundreds of German and Italian prisoners at Gromalia POW camp after the fall of Tunis, 12 May 1943

TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN

After El Alamein, Eighth Army pursues Axis forces across Libya, and by January 1943 Tunisia becomes the final battleground in North Africa. With Allied (including American) forces also approaching from the west, Axis troops fight fiercely, particularly around the Mareth Line. However, the remaining Axis forces are forced to surrender at Tunis, ending the Desert War.

CHARTING THE WESTERN DESERT CAMPAIGN

The war in the desert was a relentless litany of battles, operations, sieges and raids across the scorching sands of Libya and Egypt

1 BATTLE OF SIDI BARRANI

10-11 DECEMBER 1940 SIDI BARRANI, EGYPT

The first battle of the British counter-offensive is assigned as 'Operation Compass'. The offensive is successful and the British are able to eject Italian forces from Egypt while capturing tens of thousands of soldiers.

Italian POWs 'go into the bag' and are marched into captivity following the Battle of Sidi Barrani



2 BATTLE OF BEDA FOMM

5-7 FEBRUARY 1941 BEDA FOMM, CYRENAICA, LIBYA

The British rapidly advance into Libya and cut off the Italian Tenth Army at Beda Fomm. Although there is fierce fighting, 25,000 Italian troops are captured. The victory is a significant boost to British morale.

3 FIRST SIEGE OF TOBRUK

10 APRIL-10 DECEMBER 1941 TOBRUK, LIBYA

A beleaguered Allied garrison holds out for eight months against German and Italian attacks. Although it is captured the following year in a humiliating British defeat, the first siege prevents Rommel from taking full advantage of his offensive into Egypt and weakens his defences on the Egyptian-Libyan frontier.



Left: Soldiers of the Royal Leicestershire Regiment man Bren gun defences around Tobruk, 10 November 1941.

TWIN PIMPLES COMMANDO RAID

17-18 JULY 1941
TOBRUK, LIBYA

OPERATION AGREEMENT

13-14 SEPTEMBER 1942
NEAR TOBRUK, LIBYA

ACTION AT MECHILI

24 JANUARY 1941
MECHILI, LIBYA

FIRST AND SECOND BATTLES OF BIR EL GUBI

19 NOVEMBER AND 4-7 DECEMBER 1941
BIR EL GUBI, LIBYA

BATTLE OF BIR HAKEIM

26 MAY-11 JUNE 1942
BIR HAKEIM, LIBYA

BATTLE OF SIDI REZEGH

NOVEMBER 1941
SIDI REZEGH, LIBYA

BATTLE OF POINT 175

29 NOVEMBER-1 DECEMBER 1941
SIDI REZEGH, LIBYA

BATTLE OF EL AGHEILA

11-18 DECEMBER 1942
EL AGHEILA, LIBYA

CAPTURE OF KUFRA

31 JANUARY-1 MARCH 1941
KUFRA, LIBYA

4 OPERATION BATTLEAXE

15-17 JUNE 1941 CYRENAICA, LIBYA

Battleaxe is an unsuccessful British offensive that attempts to raise the First Siege of Tobruk. Attacks are made against Rommel's strong defensive positions but the majority fail. The British lose 220 tanks, which at that time makes up half of their armoured vehicles in North Africa.

Right: Australian Gloster Gladiator biplanes return to base after flying a patrol over Bardia



BARDIA COMMANDO RAID

19-20 APRIL 1941
BARDIA, CYRENAICA, LIBYA

BATTLE OF BARDIA

3-5 JANUARY 1941
BARDIA, LIBYA

ATTACK ON NIBEIWA

9 DECEMBER 1940
NIBEIWA, EGYPT

OPERATION SKORPION

26-27 MAY 1941
HALFAYA PASS, EGYPT

SIEGE OF GIARABUB

DECEMBER 1940-MARCH 1941
GIARABUB, LIBYA

OPERATION BREVIETY

15-16 MAY 1941
EGYPTIAN-LIBYAN BORDER

OPERATION BRAGANZA

29 SEPTEMBER 1942
DEIR EL MUNASSIB, EGYPT

FIRST BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

1-27 JULY 1942
EL ALAMEIN, EGYPT

BATTLE OF ALAM EL HALFA

30 AUGUST-5 SEPTEMBER 1942
NEAR EL ALAMEIN, EGYPT

5 BATTLE OF GAZALA

26 MAY-21 JUNE 1942 GAZALA, NEAR TOBRUK, LIBYA

Erwin Rommel launches a daring attack against strong British defensive positions on the Gazala Line. Although he changes plans halfway through the battle, the German commander wins his most impressive victory and forces the Allies back to Egypt.

6 BATTLE OF MERSA MATRUH

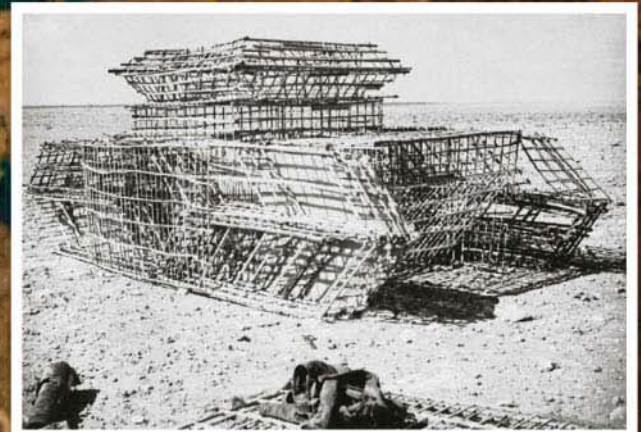
26-29 JUNE 1942 MERSA MATRUH, EGYPT

This battle is Rommel's last victory against Eighth Army when he takes the fortress port of Mersa Matruh and captures thousands of prisoners. The Allies are now forced to retreat to El Alamein, the last defensive position before Alexandria.

7 OPERATION BERTRAM

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1942 EL ALAMEIN, EGYPT

Bertram is an elaborate deception plan for the Second Battle of El Alamein. Using a dummy armoured corps, water pipeline and an amphibious landing among other deceptions, the British aim to convince the Germans that Eighth Army will begin an offensive in November at the southern end of the front at El Alamein.



Above: The framework of a dummy tank under construction in the Western Desert at the Middle East School of Camouflage

8 SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

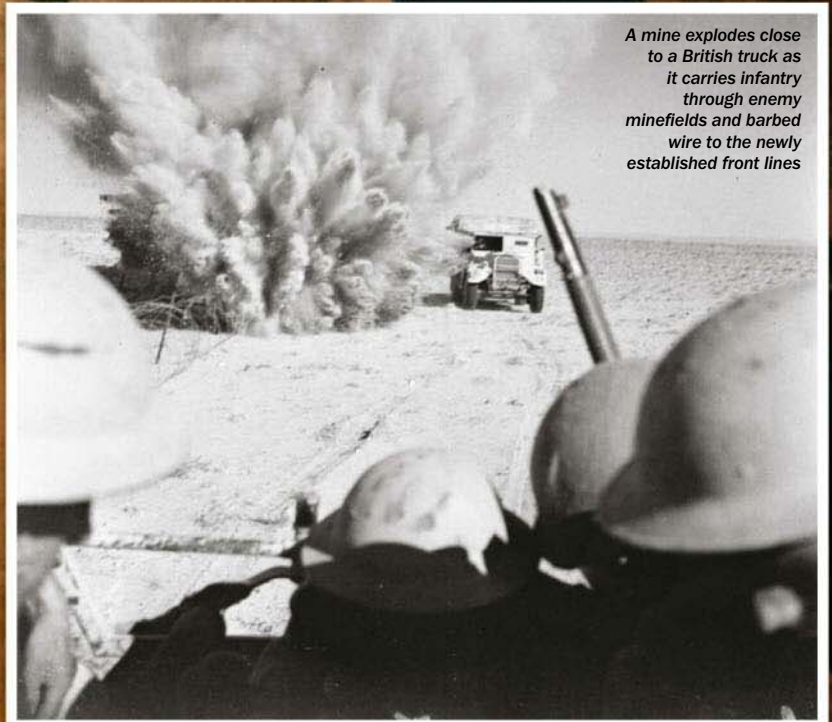
23 OCTOBER-11 NOVEMBER 1942 EL ALAMEIN, EGYPT

Bernard Montgomery launches a well-prepared offensive against Rommel's Axis forces at El Alamein after reinvigorating Eighth Army. Using great tactical flair, strategy and dogged courage, the Allied victory is decisive and Rommel is forced to abandon Egypt.

9 BATTLE OF EL AGHEILA

11-18 DECEMBER 1942 EL AGHEILA, LIBYA

El Agheila is a rearguard action in the aftermath of El Alamein. Rommel abandons Cyrenaica and withdraws to a strong defensive position but Montgomery, who has reorganised Eighth Army, outflanks the Axis forces. Rommel is forced to retreat to the Mareth Line after this last significant stand in Libya.



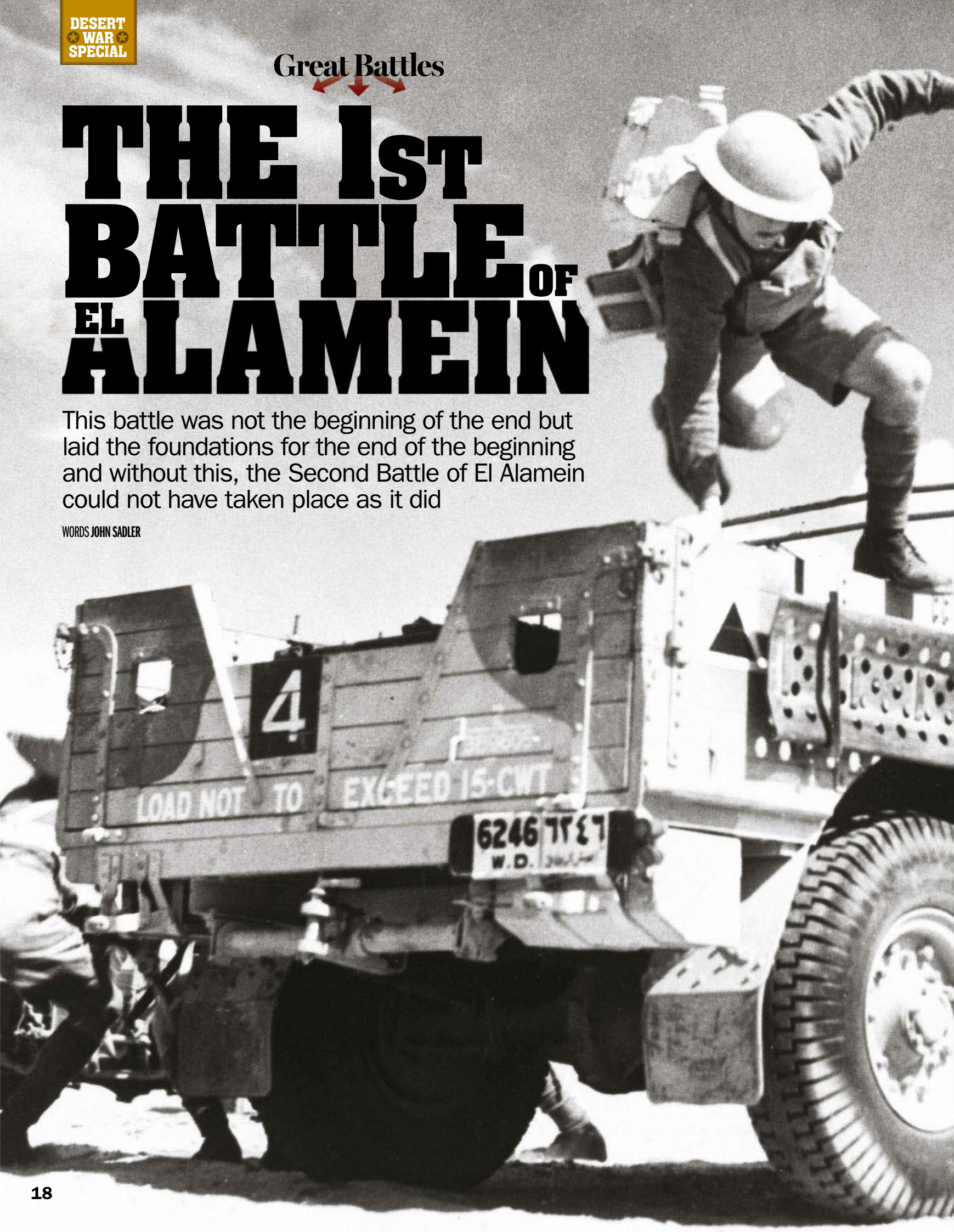
A mine explodes close to a British truck as it carries infantry through enemy minefields and barbed wire to the newly established front lines

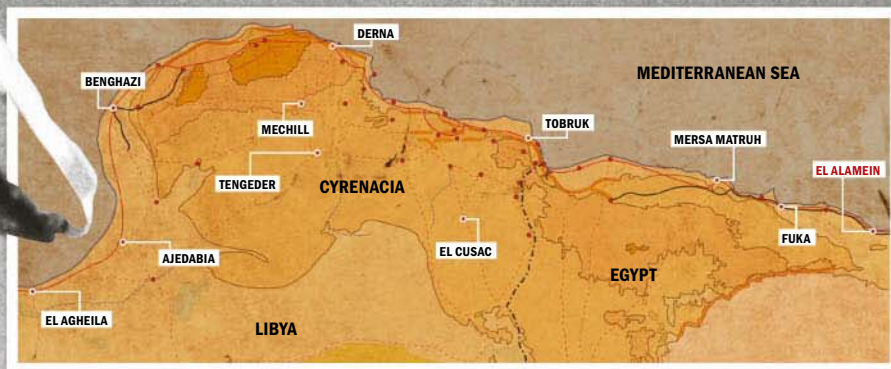
Great Battles

THE 1ST BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

This battle was not the beginning of the end but laid the foundations for the end of the beginning and without this, the Second Battle of El Alamein could not have taken place as it did

WORDS JOHN SADLER





British and Allied forces had been present in North Africa since the start of the war but had suffered a series of defeats until the First Battle of El Alamein



THE WESTERN DESERT 1 - 27 JULY 1942

There's a famous photo of General Auchinleck looking back, almost forlorn, hoping perhaps to see more of his Eighth Army troops getting back from the 'Gazala Gallop'.

Most would argue Montgomery won the Desert War, especially the man himself, but this would be to diminish the 'Auk's' achievement. The pendulum of war in North Africa swung several times and the Auk proved a capable soldier. Stopping Rommel's headlong rush toward the Nile Delta at El Alamein laid the foundations for eventual victory.

The Battle of Mersa Matruh had been another reverse for the Allies yet, despite this setback, Auchinleck had kept his army together. Only by preserving mobile field forces could the British position in the Middle East be saved. He had now retreated beyond Wavell's 'worst case' and was considering how best to defend the Delta itself.

Meanwhile, there was the ground south of El Alamein, a 38-mile strip of desert that lies between salt marsh and sea to the north and the impassable Qattara Depression, where no tank could tread. Here was terrain that favoured a defensive battle. For the most part this area is featureless until one reaches the rock-strewn hills that flank the waste of marsh and dune fronting the depression. Even these are no more than 700 feet above sea level, but nearer the sea are the various pimples, rounded hillocks or 'tells' of which Tell el Eisa and Tell el Makh Khad would prove significant.

The surfaces are everywhere barren; loose, deepening sand alternating with unyielding rock, which emerges in the narrow lateral ridges Miteirya, Ruweisat and Alam el Halfa.

The Alamein position had been identified as a natural defence line for the Delta some years beforehand. Efforts at constructing a line of fortifications had begun in the early days but operational demands had diminished any priority. Initially, the plan had been for the creation of three heavily defended localities at El Alamein and the coast, at Bab el Qattara (Qaret el Abd) and at Naqb Abu Dweis. By the

OPPOSING FORCES



ALLIES

COMMANDER:
Claude Auchinleck
INFANTRY:
150,000
(COMMONWEALTH &
ALLIED FORCES)
TANKS: 179
GUNS: 1000+
AIRCRAFT:
c. 1,500

AXIS

COMMANDER:
Erwin Rommel
GERMAN INFANTRY:
90,000
ITALIAN INFANTRY:
55,000
TANKS: 70
GUNS: 600
AIRCRAFT:
c. 500

coast some positions were dug, wired and mined, while in the centre there was rather less work completed and in the south very little at all. Water supplies were, however, on hand along the axis of the intended front.

Brigadier Eric Dorman-Smith prepared a detailed assessment of the strategic imperatives at this time, which, though it offered little guidance to the tactics to be employed in the forthcoming battle at Alamein, established Eighth Army's key priorities. Supply was acknowledged to be critical; defence of the Red Sea ports would facilitate rebuilding the army's strength and thus its future mobility. At the same time, increased activity from Malta could damage the Axis. 'Chink', as Dorman-Smith was known, recognised that the Desert Air Force was becoming a force to be reckoned with and "our only offensive weapon."

Rommel, on 30 June, was poised to attack. His men were weary and suffering from the customary shortage of supply. He did not pause but moved straight into the offensive. His limited reconnaissance was soon to be found wanting, as he had failed to appreciate the strength of the South Africans dug in around El Alamein. His plan was the 90th Light and DAK would charge the gap north of Deir el Abyad.

While the Light Division would seek to replicate its earlier success in interdicting the coast road and thus isolating the Alamein garrison, DAK would sprint south to swing around behind 13 Corps. The Italian formations were as ever given a subordinate role, with one division assaulting Alamein from the west, another behind 90th Light and the remainder trailing the panzers.

Foul conditions delayed the progress of German armour, while 90th Light bumped the Alamein defences and suffered under the intense weight of fire the South Africans brought down on them. DAK found Deir el Shein unexpectedly held by 18th Infantry Brigade and a fierce battle erupted. Newly arrived and inexperienced, the British had struggled to dig into the stony surface and had limited support. Nonetheless, they fought hard

The Matilda tank was one of the most versatile and effective vehicles for the Allies during the Desert Campaign

"HIS LIMITED RECONNAISSANCE WAS SOON TO BE FOUND WANTING AS HE HAD FAILED TO APPRECIATE THE STRENGTH OF THE SOUTH AFRICANS"

against lengthening odds and with a crumbling perimeter, their few 'I' tanks and guns disabled. Despite a very gallant stand, the survivors were forced to surrender by the evening of 1 July.

90th Light, having extricated itself from this initial contact, tried to resume its lightning dash but intense fire from South African positions stopped any advance dead in its tracks. Desert Air Force was living up to its role as a principal striking arm and the Axis sprint was grinding to a halt. DAK had suffered significant losses in available tank strength and its supply columns had been bombed incessantly. By 2 July Rommel was still making little progress and decided to throw his armour behind the assault along the coast road.

Auchinleck moved to concentrate his forces. The Kiwis were given a more fluid role, and their Sixth Brigade was pulled from Bab el Qattara with only a column remaining. The Indian Division was likewise to leave Qaret el Himeimat. As Rommel massed to attempt a breakthrough at El Alamein, 30 Corps would hold the line whilst 13 Corps launched a blow towards Deir el Abyad.

Both sides attacked during the afternoon of 2 July. In the north, the South Africans again resisted an attack, aided by 'Robcol' drawn from Tenth Indian Division. 90th Light was again harassed by the incessant attentions of

Desert Air Force and could make no headway. To the south and west, just beyond Ruweisat Ridge, British and German armour were heavily embroiled. At the end of a hard day's fighting, neither side could claim victory, but Rommel's grand offensive had barely progressed.

During the hours of darkness air attacks continued until battle was rejoined on the morning of the 3 July. There was yet more heavy fighting south of Ruweisat Ridge. In the south, Freyberg's New Zealanders achieved a notable success when they overran the artillery component of Ariete Division, netting a fine haul of prisoners and captured guns. Fifth New Zealand Brigade was in action against the Brescia division at El Mreir. By now the Axis formations were severely ground down. Rommel reported his own divisions could only muster 1,000 or 1,200 men apiece and incessant aerial bombardment was playing havoc with already overstretched supply lines. Skirmishing continued throughout 4 July but the main German effort was, for the moment, spent. It had been a failure.

Auchinleck began to think in terms of turning the stalemate into a rout, proposing to unleash 13 Corps towards the Axis rear but the British armour, probing forward, was held by a scratch gun line. Next, he planned a concentrated advance towards Deir el Shein but again this

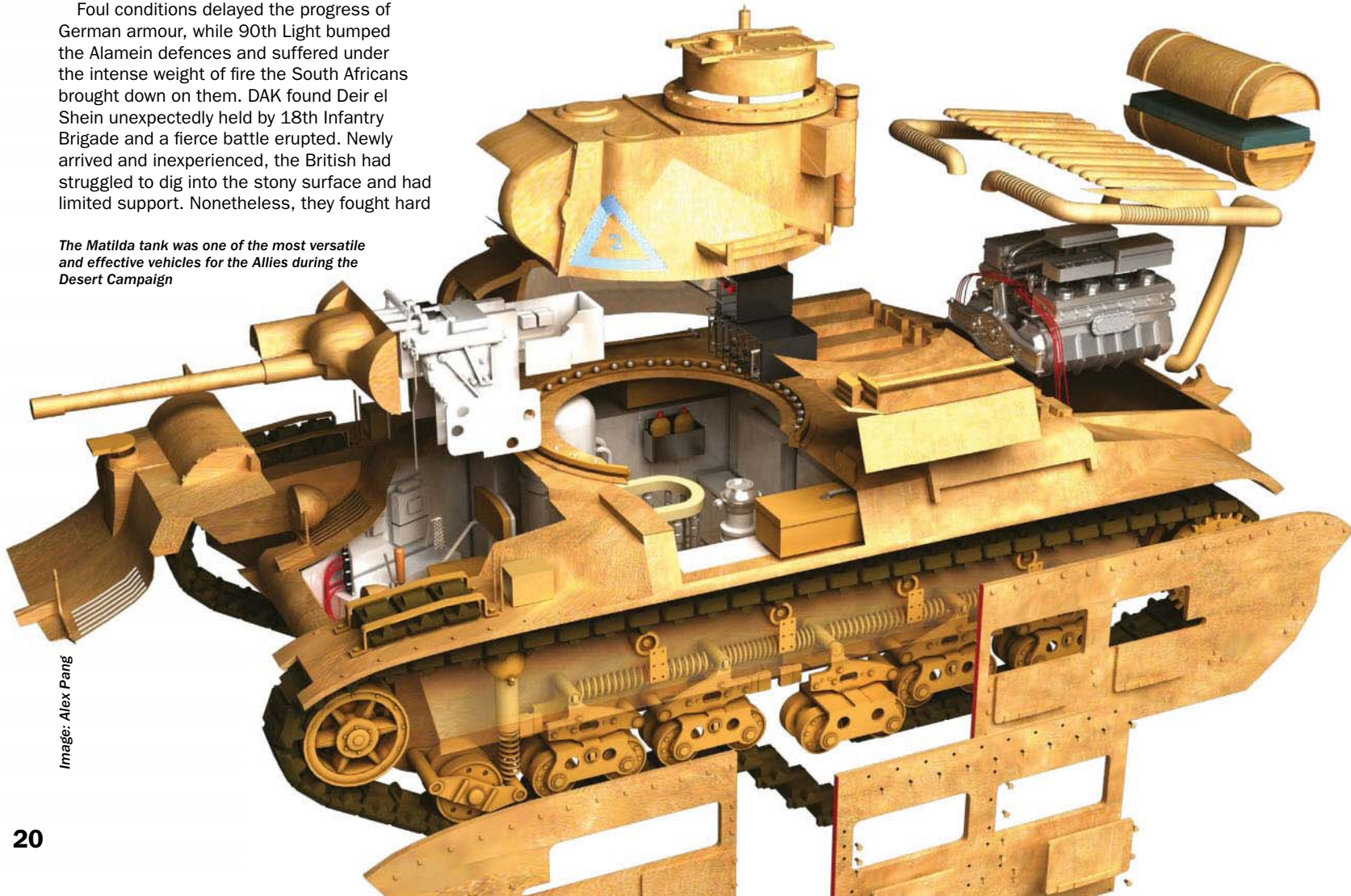


Image: Alex Pang

THE FIRST BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

A gunner from the LRDG mans a Vickers 'K' - these fearsome guns were originally intended for aircraft use but LRDG/SAS mounted them on vehicles



made little headway. SAS and LRDG (Long Range Desert Group) were active against enemy airfields, destroying some aircraft on the ground. Rommel was in fact preparing to draw off his armour and the exhausted 90th Light, leaving the Italians to hold the line while the Germans drew breath.

In this, the Luftwaffe was finally able to lend support. Auchinleck, for his part, had now decided his main blow should fall in the north and concentrated his forces accordingly. This neatly foiled an attempt by 21st Panzer to catch the New Zealand Division and the intended Axis blow fell on empty ground. Meanwhile, Desert Air Force had switched to pounding long-range targets and Axis-held ports while Coningham's fighters undertook a tactical bombing role.

Auchinleck began a series of counter-attacks. For the first he deployed 30 Corps in an attempt to seize the rocky knolls of Tell el Eisa and Tell el Makh Khad. Possession of these would facilitate further moves southwards toward Deir el Shein and raids westwards against Axis airfields. Meanwhile 13 Corps was to prevent any enemy reinforcement northwards and be ready to exploit openings. On 3 July, Morshead's Ninth Australian Division had returned to the line and was now ordered to take Tell el Eisa while the South Africans stormed Tell el Makh Khad. Both had armoured support, and the attack at first light on 10 July was preceded by a hurricane bombardment. Both formations made good progress and took many Italian prisoners.

Von Mellenthin, in charge of HQ while Rommel was absent and located only a few miles up the coast, collected a makeshift battle-group and held the line while the Desert Fox brought up more reinforcements from 15th Panzer. A late counter-attack made some progress but was beaten back. The following day the Australians attacked again in a further attempt to secure their objectives.

Fighting on the ground was matched by the fury of combat in the air; skies were crossed with trails and bruised by the chatter of guns from duelling Allied and Axis fighters. For the next three days Rommel attempted to recover lost ground and eliminate the newly formed salient, but his attacks were repulsed, and efforts to drive a wedge between the hills and the Alamein Box were equally unsuccessful. The initiative now lay with Eighth Army.

Having thrown the Axis off-balance, Auchinleck decided to maintain pressure by striking southwards against the long, lateral finger of Ruweisat Ridge. This otherwise unprepossessing feature would witness hard fighting through 14-15 July, and again on 21 July. The official history dubs these actions First and Second Ruweisat, both of which highlighted significant tactical deficiencies within Eighth Army: namely a lack of co-ordination between the infantry and armour, which resulted in tragic losses.

The objective was straightforward – storm the ridge and drive the enemy from the ground east of the Alamein-Abu Dweis track and north of the heights. The task of securing the western flank of the ridge was given to 13 Corps, while 30 Corps was to take the eastern extremity and also strike southwards from this newly created salient to take the hump of Miteirya Ridge. This was to be a night attack and 13 Corps would send in two brigades of New Zealanders while 30 Corps deployed Fifth Indian Brigade (from Fifth Indian Division). Crucial armoured support for the Kiwis was to be provided

Scottish infantry leaping from Bren carriers. The carrier was the universal work-horse of the desert war, outmoded in many ways but handy, light and agile



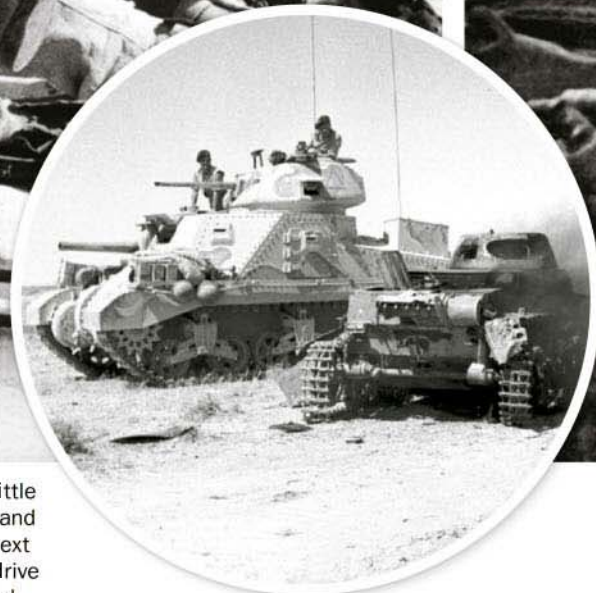
“FIGHTING ON THE GROUND WAS MATCHED BY THE FURY OF COMBAT IN THE AIR; SKIES WERE CROSSED WITH TRAILS AND BRUISED BY THE CHATTER OF GUNS FROM DUELLING ALLIED AND AXIS FIGHTERS”



Night patrols preparing to go out, 1942; constant patrolling was a feature of the war which by the time of 1st El Alamein was developing almost into positional warfare



Right: An M3 Grant passes a knocked out Panzer, 1942



by First Armoured Division, which would come up after first light – both Corps were to be on their objectives by 4.30am.

To reach their target the New Zealanders had to cover some six miles of ground in the dark. Their attack, even once the enemy was alerted, was driven home with great élan but, in the smoke and dust of a moonlit battle, many enemy posts were left unsubdued. Some units became scattered, and digging into the unyielding rock proved near impossible. Supporting arms – a few vital anti-tanks guns, were brought up but much had not arrived. The remaining infantry sought to consolidate and, above all, dig in.

30 Corps' attack met with stiff resistance and there was some confusion as the supporting armour was still distant. Italian defenders from the Brescia and Pavia Divisions had been caught off-guard and a sizable number of them bolted to the rear. Meanwhile, a passing column of German tanks fell upon the NZ 22nd Battalion, swiftly dealt with the AT guns exposed on their portees and compelled several hundred survivors to surrender.

Efforts were made to get the British armour mobile, and tanks were able to support a renewed assault by Fifth Indian Brigade, which partially succeeded in securing objectives on the ridge. Efforts to bring up supporting arms were frustrated by fire from the enemy posts that had been missed in the first rush. Only with the aid of a barrage were the reserve units able to begin filtering through.

With the Italians in disarray, Rommel had to assemble German units for the counter-attack, command of which was entrusted to Walther

Nehring. Fourth New Zealand Brigade, with little or no support, was eventually overwhelmed and the western end of the ridge was lost. The next day, on 16 July, the Germans attempted to drive off Fifth Indian Brigade, who repelled this and a subsequent attack. On the 17 July Australian troops attacked southwards towards Miteirya Ridge, taking hundreds of Italian prisoners, but they were eventually halted by heavy shelling and a German counterstrike.

In these actions, the New Zealand Division had fought hard but at considerable cost. They had stormed and taken their objectives but felt badly let down by their comrades in armour, who they blamed for leaving them desperately exposed. This suspicion and mutual incomprehension between infantry and armour boded ill and was to bedevil Eighth Army for some time.

This was not due to faintheartedness on the tankers' part but because of a misunderstanding of the role and capabilities of armour, which were far more constrained than the infantry imagined. Tank commanders such as Lieutenant General Herbert Lumsden were loath to restrict themselves to the infantry support role at the expense of mobility. He believed that tanks should be free to act as the battle unfolded to seize opportunities, while artillery and A/T guns shielded the infantry.

Despite these costly setbacks, Auchinleck was convinced the Axis forces were close to breaking. The Italians had suffered heavy losses in terms of men and materiel. Rommel's panzers were ground down and diminished. The Auk believed a further heavy blow in the centre might shatter them altogether. Overall, the

Allied position was considerably better.

The Australians and South Africans were in good shape, though the Fifth Indian and New Zealand Divisions were reduced to a mere two brigades each. First and Seventh Armoured Divisions, the latter being developed as a mixed battle-group, were at full strength. Seventh Armoured had a hefty contingent of over 60 Grants in addition to Crusaders and Honeys. 161st Indian Motor Brigade and 23rd Armoured Brigade were arriving to swell the muster. The British might have initially lagged behind the Germans in developing the ability to recover damaged machines under battlefield conditions but this was changing.

For this attack, the main impetus fell on 13 Corps to fracture the Axis at Deir el Shein and Deir el Abyad then drive west. A feint would be launched in the south and 30 Corps would ensure vigorous local action in its sector to keep enemy forces there tied down. Close air support would be provided and Lieutenant General William Gott was intending that Fifth Indian Division would storm the western end of Ruweisat Ridge, where the New Zealanders had previously come to grief.

The Kiwis themselves were tasked with taking the eastern rim of the El Mreir saucer. Once the infantry were on their objectives First Armoured Division were instructed to push westwards to a further goal, whereupon the brigades would follow up and consolidate. 22nd Armoured Brigade was instructed to cover the southern flank of the attack while Second Armoured Brigade was to interdict any initial counter-attacks once the attacking infantry were successful.

Gapping the minefields was entrusted to the infantry, though both brigades were

“THE BRITISH MIGHT HAVE INITIALLY LAGGED BEHIND THE GERMANS IN DEVELOPING THE ABILITY TO RECOVER DAMAGED MACHINES UNDER BATTLEFIELD CONDITIONS, BUT THIS WAS CHANGING”

“GENERALS ON BOTH SIDES HAD DEMANDED GREAT SACRIFICES FROM THEIR MEN AND THESE HAD BEEN FREELY MADE”



German armour panzer in action – Rommel's tanks were far superior to Allied armour at the outset

relatively inexperienced in this most difficult of tasks. Gott's plan appeared sound but a key assumption was that the minefields could be detected and gapped in time to allow 23rd Armoured Brigade, whose role was to charge forward to the further objective, to pass through.

Despite the weight of supporting artillery fire brought down, the New Zealand attack came to bear a sad resemblance to that earlier tragedy. The infantry managed, in a night attack, to gain their objectives but were left dispersed and without essential fire support. At first light Axis armour struck back, easily eliminating the few A/T guns available – the denouement was inevitable. The infantry were overrun, artillery communications broke down and the brigade suffered 700 casualties. Second Armoured did attempt to relieve the infantry but was stopped by a mix of uncleared mines and Axis fire.

161st Indian Motor Brigade's attack also experienced varying fortunes. After hard fighting, the assault battalions were either short of their objectives or driven off by vigorous counter-attacks. Only when the reserve battalion was thrown in did the attack make headway. Major General A.H. Gatehouse was now in command of First Armoured Division, as Lumsden had been wounded earlier.

He was doubtful about committing 23rd Armoured Brigade when it became clear the mines had not all been cleared and a viable gap had not been created. Gott would not countenance calling off this part of the plan, however, as he believed the enemy were badly wrong-footed. He therefore proposed that the line of advance should shift southwards to cross an area believed – or rather hoped – to be free from Axis mines.

Two tank regiments were sent in. Both were heavily shelled and struck a host of unexpected mines covering their supposedly clear approaches. Serious losses were incurred before the objective was reached, and again when the survivors were furiously attacked.

When 21st Panzer was thrown into the fight, the remnants of the battered tank regiments withdrew – 40 tanks had been wrecked and 17 badly damaged.

An attempt by Second Armoured Brigade to get through to the New Zealanders isolated in the El Mreir Depression foundered in the face of intense fire, and a further 21 tanks were lost in the fracas. Another night action on 22 July, again launched by Fifth Indian Division, aimed to finally secure the deadly Point 63 on Ruweisat Ridge but failed after a brave but costly attempt. The infantrymen's frustration with their seemingly Olympian comrades in armour was largely based on ignorance of the tactical role and capabilities of Allied tanks, but resentment simmered regardless.

On 30 Corps' front, on 22 July the Australians once again attacked. Fighting centred as before on the twin eminences of Tell el Eisa and Tell el Makh Khad. Early gains prompted a savage riposte and the Australians battled hard to hold the ground they had won. Though they had some armoured support from 50th RTR, equipped with Valentines, liaison between the infantry and armour was again patchy, and 23 tanks were knocked out of action for meagre gains.

Despite these costly reverses, Auchinleck was not yet ready to concede a stalemate and persisted in the belief that the Axis were on the cusp of disintegration. This time, on 26 July, an attempt was to be launched by 30 Corps, beefed up with additional armour and infantry, to advance through the gap between Miteirya Ridge and Deir el Dhib. For its part 13 Corps, battered by previous exertions, would mount a convincing, full-scale diversion to the south.

The task of gapping the enemy's minefields southeast of the ridge fell to the South Africans. By 1am the Australians were to have seized the eastern flank and then advanced north and west. An infantry brigade would pass through the openings to Deir el Dhib, gapping

any minefields they encountered. Then it would be the turn of the armour to strike westwards.

Some initial success was soon shrouded in a mist of confusion. The armour did not come up and, once again, the attacking infantry were left vulnerable, an opportunity the Germans never failed to exploit. Sixth DLI and Fifth East Yorks were overrun, as were the survivors of 2/28th Australian Battalion. As before, heavy fire prevented supporting arms from getting through.

By the end of July both sides were played out, reeling like punch-drunk fighters. Generals on both sides had demanded great sacrifices from their men and these had been freely made. By the end Rommel's seemingly unstoppable run and the dismal series of Eighth Army defeats had been halted.

The First Battle of El Alamein must rank as an Allied defensive victory, even though Auchinleck's efforts to break the Axis had, with the exception of Ninth Division's northerly salient, foundered with high cost in men and materiel. Allied infantry, attacking at night, had shown competence and dogged persistence but the vital support from armoured formations at dawn had not been forthcoming, leaving a wide and embittered breach between the infantry and armour of Eighth Army.

FURTHER READING

✪ BARR, N., *PENDULUM OF WAR, THE THREE BATTLES OF EL ALAMEIN* (LONDON, 2004);

✪ PLAYFAIR, MAJOR-GENERAL I.S.O., *OFFICIAL HISTORY, UK MILITARY SERIES, CAMPAIGNS, MEDITERRANEAN AND MIDDLE EAST VOLS. 1 - 4*, (LONDON, 1962 - 1966);

✪ PITT, B., *THE CRUCIBLE OF WAR 1: WAVELL'S COMMAND* (LONDON, 1986)

THE CRUCIBLE OF WAR 2: AUCHINLECK'S COMMAND (LONDON, 1986)

THE CRUCIBLE OF WAR 3: MONTGOMERY AND ALAMEIN (LONDON, 1986).

THE DESERT PIPER

WORDS GAVIN MORTIMER



Jim Simpson died in April 2016. He was the last of the pipers who led the Black Watch into battle

The bagpipes of Jim Simpson led his company of Black Watch into battle at El Alamein. Nearly 75 years later, he reflected on what it was like to spur his Highlanders forward amid the chaos of explosions and machine-gun fire

The 51st Highland Division suffered disastrous losses during the fall of France in 1940, when more than 10,000 men were forced to surrender to the Germans on 12 June, after being surrounded at Valéry-en-Caux (between Dieppe and Le Havre).

Consequently, a new 51st Highland Division was raised. The new Division included the 153rd Infantry Brigade, comprised of the First Battalion The Gordon Highlanders, 5/7th Battalion The Gordon Highlanders and Fifth Battalion The Black Watch.

The 51st Highland Division sailed from the UK for the Middle East, via the Cape of Good Hope, in June 1942, and arrived in Egypt two months later. The 51st Highland Division was first deployed in defensive duties on the western approaches to Cairo. Then, in October 1942 it marched the 150-or-so miles to El Alamein, accompanied on its way by the music from the division's pipers.

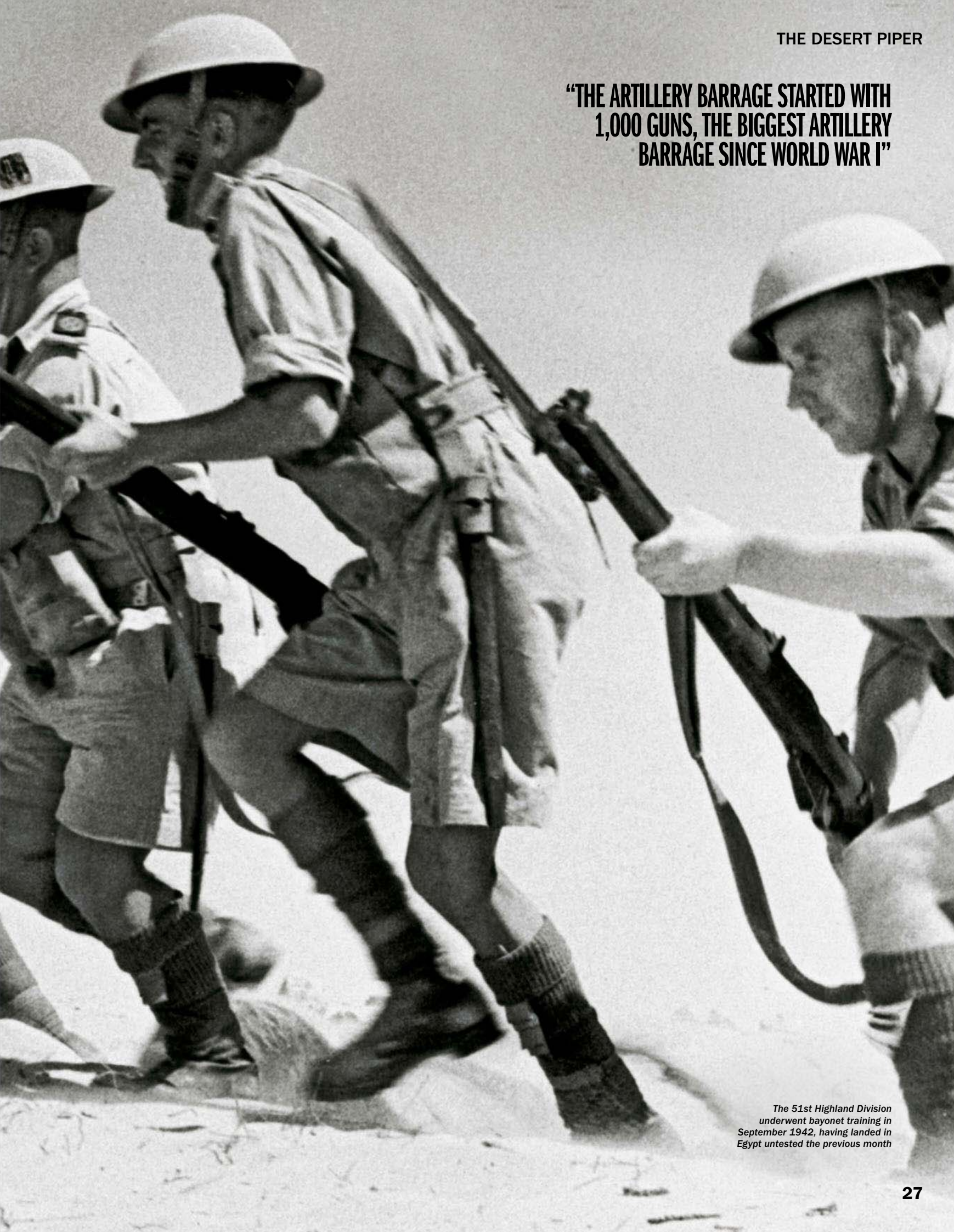
One of these pipers was James Simpson, D Company, Fifth Battalion, The Black Watch. Born and bred in Dundee, Jim left school in 1934 aged 16 and just five years later was called up to serve.

WHEN DID YOU JOIN THE ARMY?

I received my call-up papers in October 1939 and was told to report to this place in Perth. A series of doctors examined us – I was graded A1 – and then we had an interview with a colonel, and he decided what to do with us. He decided I could join the band, having learned to play the bagpipes in the Boys Brigade in Dundee. I didn't know I was going to the Black Watch at this stage.

I went back to work for three months, and then in January [1940] I was posted to D Company of Fifth Battalion, Black Watch, and our company commander was Lord Douglas Gordon, who should have joined the Gordons,

**“THE ARTILLERY BARRAGE STARTED WITH
1,000 GUNS, THE BIGGEST ARTILLERY
BARRAGE SINCE WORLD WAR I”**



*The 51st Highland Division
underwent bayonet training in
September 1942, having landed in
Egypt untested the previous month*

but I think he joined Fifth Battalion because there were more of his pals! We called Lord Douglas 'Dougie'. It was a friendly battalion, a lot of Dundee boys. A Company was all Forfar district, B Company was Brechin, C Company was Montrose. There were four rifle companies and each had a company piper. We were all made lance corporals and you got paid more – two shillings a day extra – and the rest of the band formed the Ack-Ack [anti-aircraft] platoon.

WHAT FORM OF TRAINING DID YOU RECEIVE?

We did our basic training in Perth, and I remember it was one of the coldest winters in years. Then we did some more training in the Highlands, in Banchory, and from there we went to Forres. I had a lass in Forres, and I had one in Banchory as well! The training was very hard; we would go away for three days just like that. One time we left Banchory and three days later we finished in Grantown-on-Spey. That was tough, through the mountains. We trained for mountain warfare and then they sent us to the desert!

Right: Commander of the 51st Highland Division Major General Douglas Wimberley

“THERE WAS A WIRE NETTING AROUND THE BAND IN THE CORNER, AND WE DISCOVERED THAT THIS WAS BECAUSE THE AUSTRALIANS WERE INCLINED TO THROW BEER BOTTLES AT THE ORCHESTRA”

But it was a long training process, and we felt we were ready for it by the time it had finished... We had one afternoon a week off and for the rest of the week it was stand to or training. Then we were under canvas in Hazlehead Park in Aberdeen. This was just after Dunkirk, and you had to be ready to move at a moment's notice, so our kit was always ready.

DESCRIBE YOUR POSTING TO EGYPT

We were shipped out to the Middle East via South Africa and went up the Suez Canal and disembarked at Port Tewfik [now Port Suez, situated at the southern boundary of the Canal]. We then went by train to our camp at El Quassasin [the largest transit base in Egypt – it was divided into 50 identical camps] and that's where we did our training for a while, with our burned heads and burned legs. Then in late August we went up to Mena to defend the western approaches to Cairo.

We managed to visit Cairo but not the pyramids. We used to go

to these places, not nightclubs, but places where the ladies would come over and get you what you wanted to drink. There was a wire netting around the band in the corner, and we discovered that this was because the Australians were inclined to throw beer bottles at the orchestra. And we were warned that if the girls came over to offer you a drink say no, because it's just coloured water and they're trying to get you to drink the expensive stuff! I went there with my pal Chick.

DID YOU SEE ANYTHING OF GENERAL MONTGOMERY?

Oh yes, he came to see us. I never thought much about him at all. We didn't think about anything much in those days. We paraded when we had to, then we were dismissed and we thought "Thank goodness that's finished."

DID YOU PRACTISE MUCH WITH THE BAND?

Not once we were abroad. I was always with D Company, but I piped all the time with them... I piped reveille, that was *Johnnie Cope*, and other duties: lights out was *Donald Blue*; *Bannocks Of Barley Meal* was cookhouse and also *A Man's A Man For A' That* [Commanding Officer's Orders].

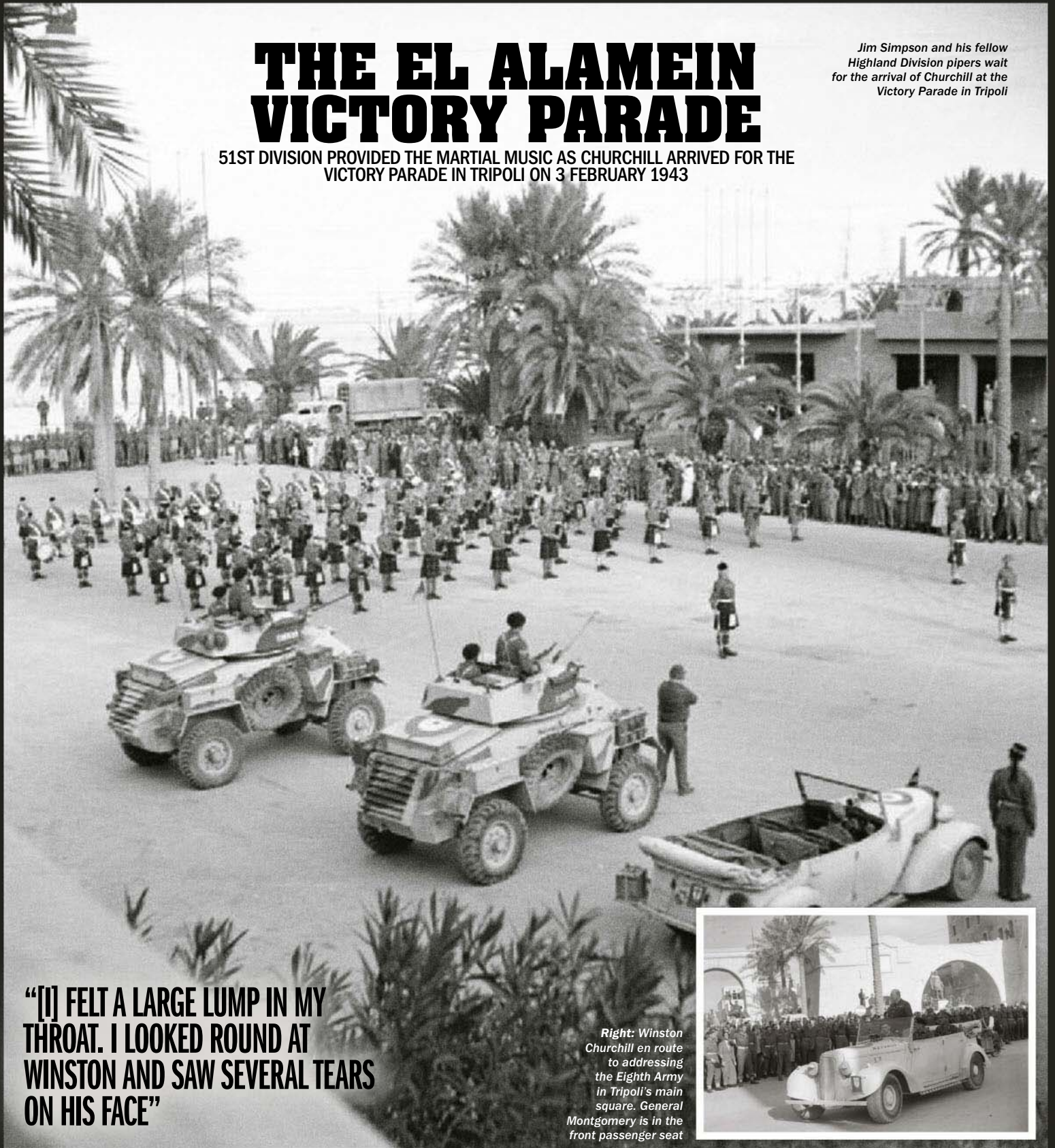


The barrage that began the battle of El Alamein was the most intense British bombardment since WWI

THE EL ALAMEIN VICTORY PARADE

51ST DIVISION PROVIDED THE MARTIAL MUSIC AS CHURCHILL ARRIVED FOR THE VICTORY PARADE IN TRIPOLI ON 3 FEBRUARY 1943

Jim Simpson and his fellow Highland Division pipers wait for the arrival of Churchill at the Victory Parade in Tripoli



“[I] FELT A LARGE LUMP IN MY THROAT. I LOOKED ROUND AT WINSTON AND SAW SEVERAL TEARS ON HIS FACE”

Right: Winston Churchill en route to addressing the Eighth Army in Tripoli's main square. General Montgomery is in the front passenger seat

A victory parade was held in Tripoli, 950 miles west of El Alamein, on 3 February 1943, to celebrate the success in North Africa. Churchill arrived fresh from his historic conference with Franklin Roosevelt at Casablanca, in which they demanded the “unconditional surrender” of Germany.

When the prime minister arrived in the city the streets were packed with Allied service personnel, along with curious civilians and numerous war correspondents. Standing in a roofless car, Churchill proceeded along the main street lined with tanks and troops. Among the crowd was a reporter from *The Times*, who later said: “The party thus reached the sea front, where men of the 51st (Highland) Division were drawn up with their bagpipes, which provided that martial music without which no military review is complete even

in the midst of war.” Jim Simpson and his fellow pipers serenaded their prime minister. One of his accompanying generals, Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff later said, “[I] felt a large lump in my throat. I looked round at Winston and saw several tears on his face.”

Churchill returned to the main square and mounted a dais where, for 30 minutes, he stood at the salute “while victorious and happy men of the Eighth Army, with tanks, guns, armoured cars, foot soldiers, troops in lorries, a naval detachment, and a small group of nursing sisters marched proudly before him.” In a brief address Churchill thanked them all in the name of the king and the people of the United Kingdom for a victory “that had altered the whole character of the war.”

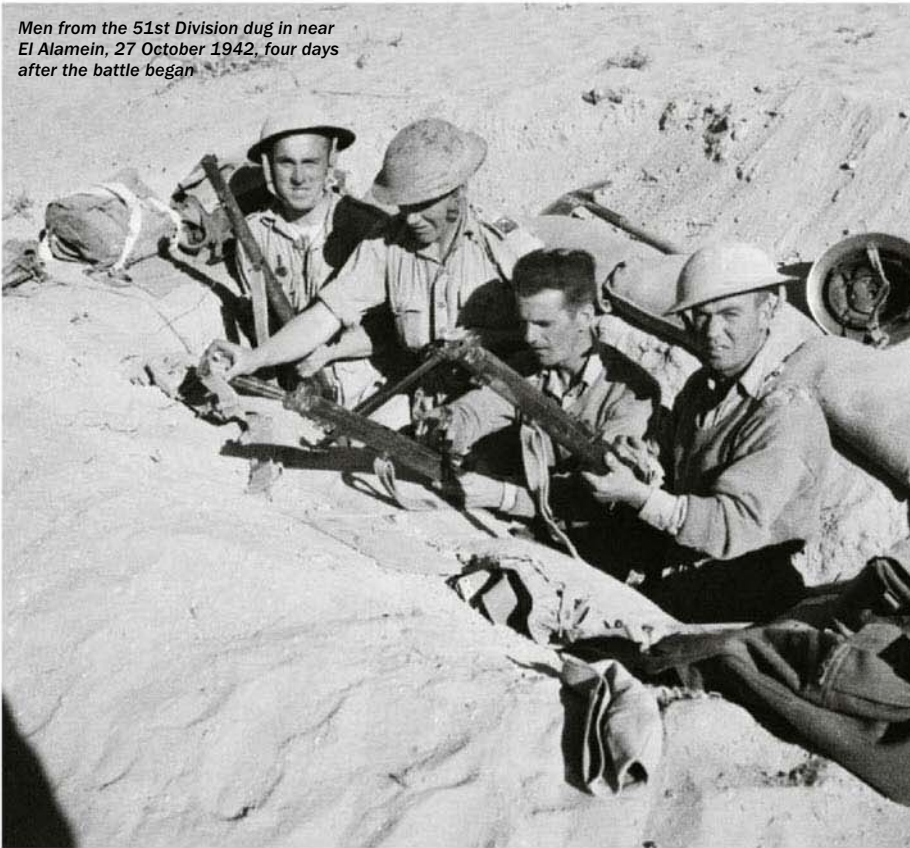
“WHEN WE OPENED THE TIN OF BULLY BEEF THE SUN HAD MELTED ALL THE FAT AND SO IT WAS JUST LIKE SOUP. WE JUST DIPPED OUR HARDTACK INTO IT”



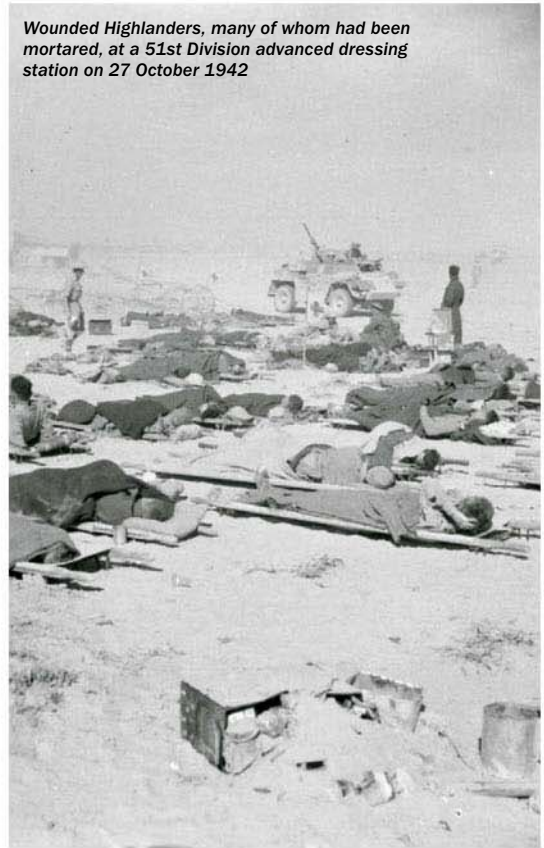
*British troops and armour
advance through the desert*



Men from the 51st Division dug in near El Alamein, 27 October 1942, four days after the battle began



Wounded Highlanders, many of whom had been mortared, at a 51st Division advanced dressing station on 27 October 1942



“IT WAS A TERRIFIC BARRAGE AND THE PIPES HAD TO BE PRETTY CLOSE, BUT MY COMPANY COULD HEAR ME, AND WE HEARD THE PIPER OF THE GORDONS AS THEY CAME UP BEHIND US”

Shortly before the start of the Second Battle of El Alamein in October 1942, the 51st Highland Division moved up into defensive ‘boxes’ 25 miles east of El Alamein, with 154 Brigade on the left and 153 Brigade (containing Fifth Black Watch) on the right. The Highland Division’s objectives were a series of German strongpoints on their defensive line that had to be secured in order to allow the tanks to pass through. The objectives were code-named after Scottish towns, and the Fifth Black Watch were tasked with capturing ‘Montrose’, ‘Forfar’ and ‘Arbroath’. Supported by a massive creeping artillery barrage, the 51st Highland Division were required to advance through minefields to capture their objectives.

WHAT WAS THE GENERAL FEELING AMONG THE MEN BEFORE THE SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN STARTED?

It was very well organised. We went there the day before the start of the battle, and were put into trenches and told not to move until the next day. That night was a full moon, and a start line had been made for us, and we had to go on to the start line. We had to go through miles of minefields, and they told us nothing very much about them. There were mines all over the place, and we used to put markers up where the minefields were, and the Germans did the same, so you knew where they were... but with the wind blowing all the time you could see the mines, which were mostly anti-tank mines. In those days the engineers prodded the sand with

a bayonet to find the mines because they didn’t have many detectors.

WHAT WERE THE OPENING HOURS OF THE BATTLE LIKE?

The artillery barrage started with 1,000 guns, the biggest artillery barrage since World War I. The whole horizon was lit up by these guns behind us, which put down a creeping barrage. It was 200 yards in front of us, so as we advanced the barrage advanced. I was in front of the company with the pipes but I can’t remember what I played – *Highland Laddie* I think. We reached our objectives and the [First] Gordons passed through us to their objective [which was taken after heavy fighting].

COULD YOU HEAR THE SOUND OF PIPES ABOVE THE NOISE OF BATTLE?

Sometimes. It was a terrific barrage and the pipes had to be pretty close, but my company could hear me, and we heard the piper of the Gordons as they came up behind us.

IN THE PITCH BLACK HOW DID YOU KEEP TOGETHER AS A COMPANY?

During the advance it was up to your leader to go so many yards at a certain speed, and the way you knew the direction to go was that there was a small anti-aircraft gun, a Bofors gun, and it fired tracers, and your tracer would be blue or green, for example, and you would have to follow that tracer.

We dug in and were there for 12 days. There were constant attacks on the German strongpoints. For instance, we had to make a silent attack one time – with no pipes or artillery – on this strongpoint, which was part of their defensive line, and there was a big skirmish and carry-on. Eventually we took the strongpoint, and after it was all over and most of the Germans had either run away or been killed I sat down on this half-track vehicle. Then, the company commander, Captain [Charles] McGregor, came over and started swearing at me. I asked what was wrong and he said, “That’s a German you’re sitting next to.” I thought he was one of our boys. He was bomb happy [shell-shocked] and they took him away.

WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER OF BEING RELIEVED ON 2 NOVEMBER?

I remember coming back, walking back having been relieved, and we were all shattered. During the battle there was always something going on over the 12 days, and the Germans kept us awake at night by firing tracers. We got to where the 25 pounders were still firing and they suddenly went off, and the whole company scattered. We were bomb happy. We’d been 100-strong as a company, and we lost 60 men killed or wounded. One of the dead was Captain McGregor, who was killed a few days after the start of the battle.

We lost him because of code words. Instead of saying “halt” or “who goes there” after sunset – because then it was like a black void in the desert, and you didn’t know who was who – we had code words. It could be something like ‘Betty Gable’ and the response would be ‘Frank Sinatra’. He went out with a platoon on a patrol, and when he came back he gave no answer [to the codeword] so they opened fire.

THE 51ST HIGHLAND DIVISION

THE 51ST HIGHLAND DIVISION ENJOYED A STRONG BOND WITH FIELD MARSHAL MONTGOMERY THROUGHOUT THE WAR

"It is at once a humiliation and an honour to have had such a Division under one's command," said Field Marshal Montgomery after the war. "I shall always remember the Highland Division with admiration and high regard."

It was a bond forged in the desert that continued for the rest of the war and also earned the respect of Montgomery's peers: "During the last war, I had the opportunity of seeing most of the British, Dominion and Indian Divisions, many American Divisions, and several French and Belgian Divisions," wrote Field Marshal The viscount Alanbrooke. "The 51st unquestionably takes its place alongside the very few which, through their valour and fighting record, stands in a category of their own."

From North Africa the 51st Division crossed the Mediterranean and took part in the conquest of Sicily, fighting their way up the east coast of the island and suffering numerous casualties at Vizzini, Francofonte, Gerbini and Sferro. They then returned to the United Kingdom, and on 7 June the 51st Division

landed at Normandy as part of 1 Corps. For the following weeks operated to the east of the Orne and north east of Caen, in an area known as the Triangle. There has been much post-war controversy about the effectiveness of the 51st Division in France, with Max Hastings and Anthony Beevor just two of several historians who have been critical of their contribution, basing their evidence on a comment from Montgomery on 15 July 1944, "that 51st Division is at present not – NOT – battleworthy."

A subsequent change in senior command remedied the situation, and the 51st Division served with distinction in the Ardennes in Christmas 1944, before crossing the Rhine in March 1945 and helping to clear the enemy out of north-east Holland to the sea.

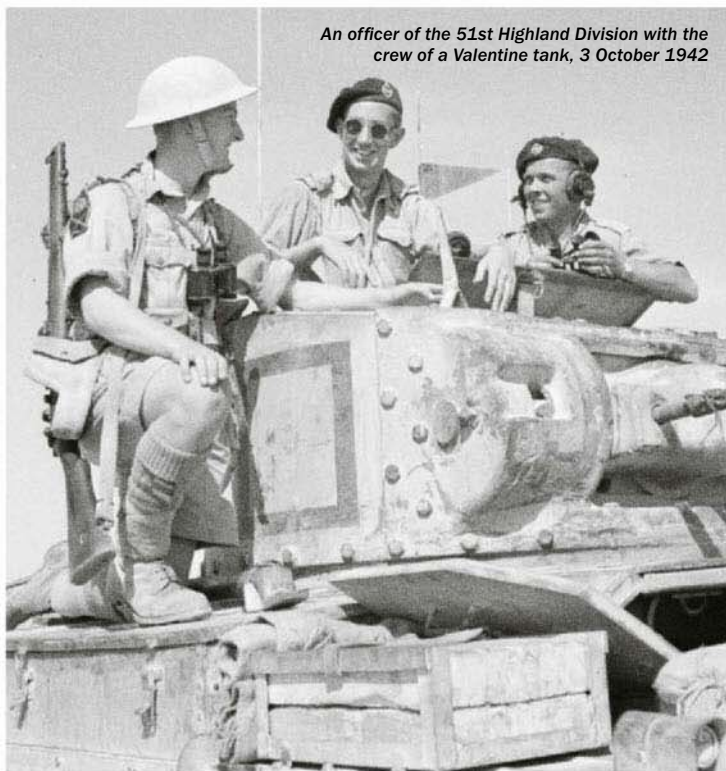
Below: Pipers of the 51st Highland Division at a ceremony to mark the handover of Bremerhaven by British to American forces on 20 May 1945



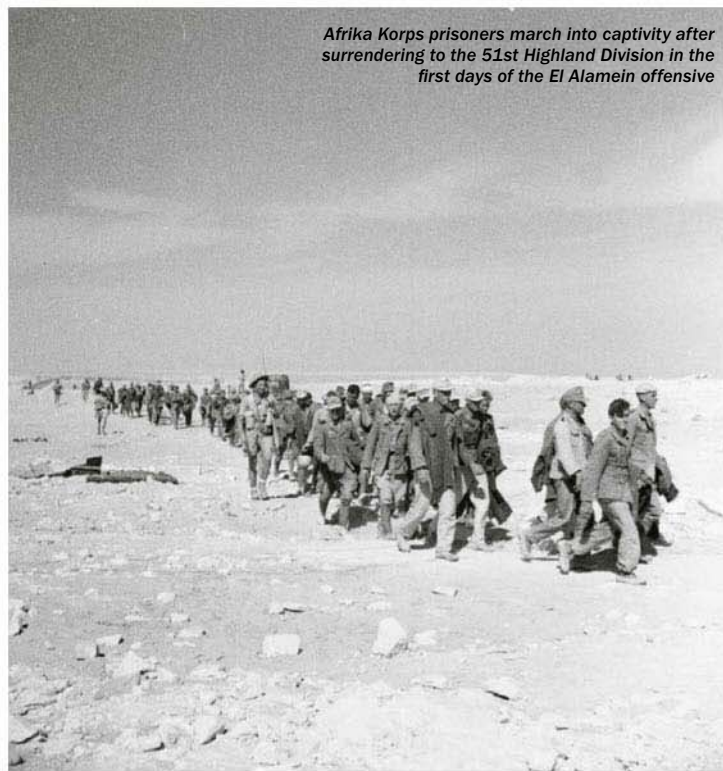
"THE 51ST UNQUESTIONABLY TAKES ITS PLACE ALONGSIDE THE VERY FEW WHICH, THROUGH THEIR VALOUR AND FIGHTING RECORD, STAND IN A CATEGORY OF THEIR OWN"



Infantrymen of 51st Highland Division near Udenhout in Holland, 29 October 1944, accompanied by Sherman tanks



An officer of the 51st Highland Division with the crew of a Valentine tank, 3 October 1942



Afrika Korps prisoners march into captivity after surrendering to the 51st Highland Division in the first days of the El Alamein offensive

WHAT WERE THE RATIONS YOU RECEIVED IN THE DESERT?

We were living off bully beef. At sunrise we were issued with a tin of bully beef and a pack of hardtack biscuits and that was to do us for the rest of the day, until the evening when we got a hot meal. But when we opened the tin of bully beef the sun had melted all the fat and so it was just like soup. We just dipped our hardtack into it. Sometimes we got rice from the Indian [Fourth] Division.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE FIFTH BLACK WATCH NEXT?

We chased the Germans across the desert. We walked most of the time and when we got to Sollum [on the Libyan-Egyptian frontier], where the Western Desert divides from the Libyan Desert, our brigade, 153, was withdrawn from the 51st Division, and we cut across the desert as a brigade. But we had transport only for one battalion so we walked for two days and then rode one day. I piped when we were walking across the desert. I think it was for morale, a tradition from World War I.

We were heading to El Agheila, hoping to get there before Rommel, because he was expected to make a stand there, but we didn't get there in time. I remember one incident during this time: we were to lay a minefield of anti-personnel mines in front of a position, and they detailed a platoon to do this, and they went back to get a [half-track] carrier of anti-personnel mines, and they came back with us. We were in a wadi [valley], and the carrier came back with the mines, and it just went over the wadi and it exploded. There was a whole platoon beside the carrier, and I don't know what happened – the platoon had been wiped out. Someone said the man who had the detonators had cadged a lift on the carrier and that's what had set the mines off. We picked up this one lad who was still alive and carried

“I WAS THE ONLY ONE OF THE COMPANY PIPERS OF THE FIFTH BATTALION – EXCEPT FOR THE PIPE MAJOR – TO MAKE IT ALL THE WAY THROUGH FROM EL ALAMEIN TO TUNIS”

him to a regimental aid post, which was a few miles back, but he died on the way back – bled to death. The next day there was a boot lying in the wadi, and none of the lads wanted to pick it up because they thought there would be a foot in it. Eventually I went to pick up the boot and there was no foot inside.

[Next we] went to Tripoli. We were quite early in there [late January 1943]. Our company commander complained [about] where they had put us so they gave us a camp near the beach. There was a coast road, and the beach was one side, and we were on the other side of the road. Reveille was six in the morning and instead of doing PT [physical training] we would rush across the road and plunge into the water and do our PT.

DID YOU TAKE PART IN THE VICTORY PARADE AT TRIPOLI ON 3 FEBRUARY 1943?

Yes, we were part of the victory parade at Tripoli. Winston Churchill came, and we marched as a massed band – the Black Watch, the Argylls, the Gordons, the Seaforths and the Camerons. We [The Black Watch] should have been at the front as the senior regiment of Highlanders, but the Camerons were in front of Churchill, so we marched back and counter-marched through the Camerons.

WAS THAT THE DESERT CAMPAIGN FINISHED FOR YOU?

No, we then went to the Mareth Line, which the Germans were defending very hard, and we had a hard time of it from Tripoli to Tunis. When we went up to the Mareth Line, which the French

had built like a sort of Maginot Line between Tunisia and Tripolitania – the former name for the north west province in Libya – that was the first time we experienced German rockets. We'd had no rockets up until then, and suddenly we heard this horrible noise, and it was the Germans firing rockets for the first time [the 21cm Nebelwerfer 42 multiple rocket launcher]. We had a terrible time of it in the battle for the Mareth Line [Fifth Black Watch lost 23 men in a series of actions between 18 – 25 March].

CAN YOU REMEMBER THE END OF THE DESERT CAMPAIGN?

We went on to the port of Sfax in April, and from there to a place called Enfidaville [80 miles south of Tunis], which was a small fishing harbour filled with LCI [Landing Craft Infantry], and we spent quite a while there rehearsing for Sicily by going up to the Mediterranean in the LCI. When I heard the war in the desert was over, I never felt much about that, it was just another day, but I was the only one of the company pipers of the Fifth Battalion – except for the pipe major – to make it all the way through from El Alamein to Tunis.

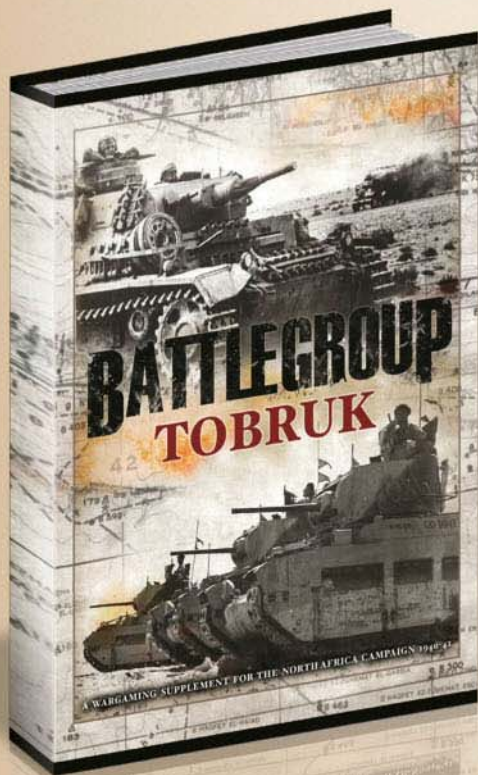
Next we went to Malta, and then took part in the invasion of Sicily, and I was wounded at Sferro [on 19 July 1943]. We took this bridge over the river Dittaino with no bother, but then the Germans began firing everything they had at us. I was wounded by shrapnel in the leg, and Chick, my friend, was killed, although I didn't know it at the time. Eventually we were relieved, and I was taken out on a stretcher in the back of a jeep and eventually flown to Algiers.

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EYES AND FE

A Guards Patrol en route to a road watch in the Libyan Desert. The Patrol would camp out for days and note the number of vehicles passing, as well as their contents



ARS

Intelligence and reconnaissance missions were vital in the struggle for the desert, and the British had just the men to carry them out

WORDS GAVIN MORTIMER


The Germans believed they had an invaluable advantage over the British in North Africa at the start of 1942 – his name was Colonel Bonner Fellers, the American military attaché in Cairo. Fellers was no spy – he was just loud-mouthed, careless and industrious. From his office in the Egyptian capital, he transmitted hundreds of coded messages to his military masters in Washington, describing in detail how the Allies were progressing in the war against the Axis forces. The problem was that the Italians knew the Americans’ ‘black code’, and every message sent by Fellers from September 1941 to June 1942 was decoded and passed to Rommel, who called them “my little Fellers.”

But the self-satisfaction of the Desert Fox was misplaced, because while he had his ‘little Fellers’ his enemy had their own little secrets. “I remember very vividly the day when I was introduced to ‘uncle Henry’, for uncle Henry was the pet name by which Ultra went in the Middle East,” recalled Lieutenant Colonel Enoch Powell, a member of the Joint Intelligence Committee in Cairo. “[It]... told us the most significant and important things, in particular facts that enabled the German supply position in North Africa to be calculated more accurately than was known to Rommel himself. The cargoes, places of arrival, capacity of ships, ammunition state, the transportation difficulties, these became part of a picture.”

In the summer of 1941, Britain’s Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park cracked the German Enigma code, and for the rest of the Desert War the Allies were able to read Rommel’s communiqués. As the war wore on throughout 1942, this window into German strategy proved crucial for the Allies. At the start of July 1942, for example, shortly after the Allies had been thrust back by an Axis offensive – what was called the ‘Gazala Gallop’ – the decoded German messages sent to the British generals Claude Auchinleck and Eric Dorman-Smith revealed that Rommel’s troops were exhausted and his supplies dwindling, especially fuel. The Allies stopped their retreat and dug in, beating off German attacks in what became known as the First Battle of El Alamein.

The three-week battle took its toll on Rommel, physically and emotionally, and the health bulletins he sent to Germany were intercepted by Ultra. The deteriorating health of the Desert Fox was a boost to the new commander of the Eighth Army, General Montgomery, as he began planning the Second Battle of El Alamein.

But Ultra wasn’t the only tool at the Allies’ disposal in 1942. Two years earlier Britain had raised its first special forces unit, initially called



“THE DETERIORATING HEALTH OF THE DESERT FOX WAS A BOOST TO THE NEW COMMANDER OF THE EIGHTH ARMY, GENERAL MONTGOMERY, AS HE BEGAN PLANNING THE SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN”

“THE OPENING DAYS OF THE SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN WERE DECIDED NOT BY BLETCHLEY PARK, BUT BY BLOOD AND GUTS”

the Long Range Patrol and then eventually re-named the Long Range Desert Group [LRDG]. Its founding members were a mixture of tough New Zealanders and British officers, the majority of the latter having been scientists and explorers in civilian life. Their commander was 44-year-old Ralph Bagnold, a seasoned desert explorer, who in selling his idea for the unit to Middle East Command in June 1940 promised to commit “piracy on the high seas.”

But the men of the LRDG were much more than mere pirates. Their speciality was reconnaissance – penetrating deep into the heart of the Libyan Desert where the Axis forces feared to tread, and then gathering intelligence on the enemy’s strength and movements. Powell hailed their “mastery of desert travel” and called their contribution to the war in North Africa “remarkable”. In the summer of 1942, Powell was escorted by the LRDG to the Qattara Depression, a remarkable natural depression 150 miles long and 75 miles wide, to ascertain if it was accessible to the Axis forces. It wasn’t – its surface of salt marshes and dry lakes was too fragile for heavy armour to cross – a snippet of intelligence that was to prove crucial to the Allies in the upcoming months.

Since November 1941, the LRDG had also provided vital assistance to the Special Air Service, formed that month by David Stirling to wage a guerrilla war deep inside enemy territory. In the first six months of the SAS’s existence, it destroyed 143 Axis aircraft, a feat which would have been impossible without the LRDG, who drove the raiders across the desert to the targets using brilliant navigational skills.

When Montgomery assumed command of the Eighth Army in August 1942, it took him a few weeks to fully understand how best to use the LRDG and the SAS. In September the two units were despatched on a series of poorly conceived raids against the enemy ports of Tobruk, Barce and Benghazi, with the aim of further reducing Rommel’s stock of supplies ahead of the impending offensive. It wasn’t the type of operation that suited either the LRDG or the SAS, and nothing was achieved other than the deaths of several brave men.

But Montgomery recognised immediately the value of Ultra. When Rommel launched his strike at Alam Halfa on the night of 30 August, just north of the Qattara Depression surveyed a few weeks earlier by Powell and the LRDG, the Eighth Army commander was waiting. One of the British participants in the battle, Ronald Lewin, later wrote, “Ultra, thickened by other intelligence, kept [Montgomery] abreast of Rommel’s intentions,” and on 2 September the German commander pulled back his forces.

Alam Halfa was Rommel’s last attempt to break the Eighth Army’s defensive line, and in the weeks that followed the battle Ultra furnished Montgomery with further proof of the Axis’ supply problems. Lewin wrote that by October 1942 Ultra was also “providing a full and detailed picture of the Panzerarmee’s order of battle.”

Montgomery knew how thinly stretched the 50,000 troops of the Panzerarmee were, but nonetheless the opening days of the Second Battle of El Alamein were decided not by Bletchley Park but by blood and guts – two armies fighting with fury and courage over the North African sand. Eventually, on the afternoon of 4 November, the Axis forces knew they were beaten and began their long and irreversible withdrawal west.

The 25 officers and 278 other ranks of the Long Range Desert Group then began to supply Montgomery with vital intelligence from deep within Axis territory. Yeomanry Patrol (so-called because its men were volunteers from Yeomanry regiments) was in position overlooking the Tripoli Road just seven days after the Eighth Army launched its massive offensive 700 miles east.

The Yeomanry Patrol watched the road from the evening of 30 October until being relieved by a New Zealand Patrol of the LRDG on 8 November. They noted every vehicle that passed in either direction: “We would camp a couple of miles from the road and each night two men would go up to the road to a hide in among the bushes and sit there for 24 hours and make a note of everything that went past,” recalled Jim Patch. The LRDG didn’t just note the weight of traffic on the road; they recorded the type of vehicles and, if visible through the dust thrown up by the wheels, what was inside the trucks: barrels, rations, barbed wire, tents, soldiers and, on one occasion, an Italian girl.

Invaluable as the road watches were, they entailed long periods of inactivity: “It was intensely boring because when you weren’t actually down on a two-man road watch you were back by the trucks, and all you could do was lay under them all day,” recalled Ron Cryer. “You couldn’t walk about because you might attract attention from the road.”

In the ten days of the road watch, the average number of vehicles a day in both directions was just under 100. Yet within three days of the New Zealanders relieving their British colleagues, they were reporting to HQ that enemy transport was streaming westward at a rate of 3,500 vehicles a day.

On 19 November, a Guards Patrol of the LRDG was ordered to a new observation area on the coastal road close to the frontier between Tripolitania (western Libya) and Cyrenaica (eastern Libya), where they remained for the next eight days. The patrol commander noted that 30 per cent of the Axis vehicles had been captured from the British in previous offensives. He also reported that there was more Afrika Korps heading west, away from the enemy, than travelling east to reinforce the frontline.

Pleasing though the results of the Alamein offensive were to the LRDG, the sheer weight of traffic on the road to Tripoli made their existence far more precarious than when the road watch began at the end of October.

In early December another Guards Patrol, this time commanded by Captain Alastair Timpson, was ordered to observe the enemy’s

700 miles behind enemy lines, the LRDG provided Montgomery with vital intelligence in the weeks after El Alamein



An LRDG patrol watching a road in North Africa, 25 May 1942



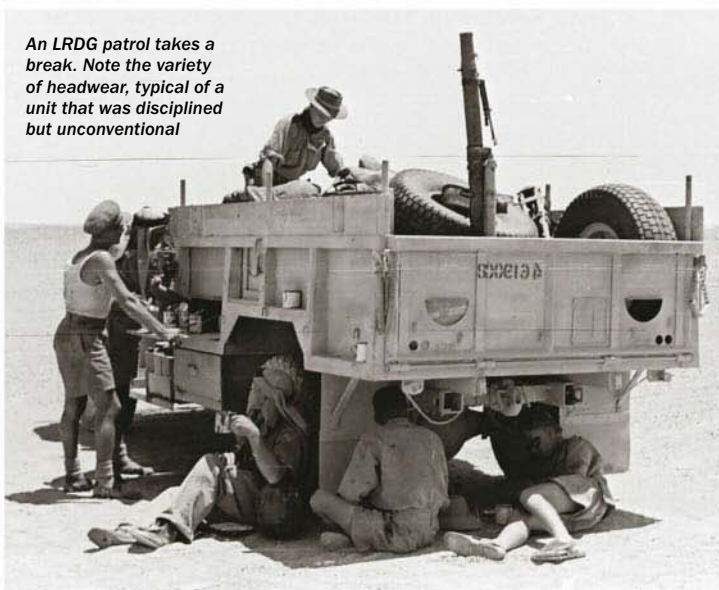
“NOT ONLY IS THE STANDARD OF ACCURACY AND OBSERVATION EXCEPTIONALLY HIGH BUT THE PATROLS ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE MOST RECENT ILLUSTRATION OF ENEMY VEHICLES AND WEAPONS... WITHOUT THEIR REPORTS WE SHOULD FREQUENTLY HAVE BEEN IN DOUBT AS TO THE ENEMY’S INTENTIONS, WHEN KNOWLEDGE OF THEM WAS ALL IMPORTANT”



Jalo, a historic Arab fort deep in the heart of Libya that the LRDG used as a base for much of the war, from which they sallied out to recon and attack the Axis forces



An LRDG patrol takes a break. Note the variety of headwear, typical of a unit that was disciplined but unconventional



movement on the road west out of El Agheila towards Tripoli. Contrary to British expectations, Rommel hadn't dug in around El Agheila (he would do so 150 miles east of Tripoli) and the LRDG discovered his intentions. Timpson and his small patrol hid in some thornwood bushes within sight of the coastal road, watching as hundreds of German trucks rumbled west: "And then they started to pull off the road," he recalled. "They halted all around us and drove up the wadi behind us... we crawled gingerly from one side of our bush to the other as a party of Germans came up to our hide-out and decided it was an excellent place for their cooker lorry."

The lorry was backed up to within yards of the bushes in which the British lay concealed, hardly daring to breathe. Within a few minutes, six German trucks were within 100 yards of the LRDG position: "Our chief worry was that they would think of using the dry thornwood as fuel for their fires," said Timpson. "There were only about eight thorn bushes like ours, and no other natural fuel was available. It did not seem very hopeful that we would see the day through undetected."

There was nothing to do but continue with the road watch, which the LRDG did, "making a list every ten minutes of the different classifications of vehicles, troops, stores, equipment and unit signals, and adding a mark against each type as it passed, in the manner of scoring at cricket."

They even noted what the Germans had for their lunch – macaroni and goulash – and that far from being a shattered army, these Afrika Korps were in good heart, laughing and singing as they ate. Their song repertoire included American jazz songs, but Timpson judged it an inappropriate moment "to raise our own spirits with a duet of *Land of Hope and Glory*."

Timpson and his patrol successfully extracted themselves – another feather in the cap of the LRDG – and that same month, December 1942, a report from the director of military intelligence in Cairo said of the unit, "Not only is the standard of accuracy and observation exceptionally high but the Patrols are familiar with the most recent illustration of enemy vehicles and weapons... Without their reports we should frequently have been in doubt as to the enemy's intentions, when knowledge of them was all important."

The LRDG continued its diligent work in January 1943, earning praise from Montgomery for reconnoitering the rugged terrain in southern Tunisia and pioneering a route that enabled the Eighth Army to launch a flanking attack on the enemy line – what Montgomery described as his "left hook" against Rommel. "I would like you to know how much I appreciate the excellent work done by your patrols," Monty informed the LRDG. "Please give my thanks to all concerned, and best wishes from Eighth Army."

Ultra, meanwhile, continued to bear fruit, apprising Montgomery of Rommel's intention to launch his first attack against his army since Alam Halfa the previous August. The assault was launched at Medenine on 6 March, and the battle lasted only a day. The Allies destroyed 52 enemy tanks and lost none of their own. Montgomery boasted that Rommel had been given a "bloody nose". He had, thanks to the ears and eyes of the Eighth Army.



Heroes of the Victoria Cross

HENRY FOOTE

A courageous officer of the Seventh Royal Tank Regiment, Foote received the VC for heroism during the Battle of Gazala in North Africa during World War II

WORDS MIKE HASKEW

Geyers of sand and shards of deadly shrapnel swirled around 42-year-old Major Henry Bowreman Foote, temporarily promoted to lieutenant colonel and in command of a battalion of the Seventh Royal Tank Regiment. German artillery played havoc among Foote's men and tanks, and the advance on a large enemy force and the gun positions that were causing such problems appeared to teeter on the brink of outright failure.

On 6 June 1942, the Seventh Royal Tank Regiment was heavily involved in the Battle of Gazala, a pivotal engagement in the Desert War that had raged across North Africa – a principle theatre of World War II – for more than two years. On this day, however, Foote had little time to contemplate the big picture. His primary concern was maintaining a cohesive pursuit of the enemy near Sidra Ridge and minimising the casualties his own men were absorbing from the brutal artillery bombardment.

Lieutenant Colonel Foote issued orders and encouragement, and when his own tank shuddered to a halt from a disabling hit from a German shell, he was undeterred. Foote exited the disabled tank, which was belching smoke and fire, and proceeded towards another armoured vehicle to resume command of the advance. While moving across the open, under the incessant artillery and anti-tank fire, Foote was continuously exposed and sustained a serious wound in the neck. Nevertheless, he reached a second tank, climbed aboard his new mount and continued to direct his command.

In order to maintain a clear field of vision, he stayed outside the tank, further exposing himself to enemy fire.

When the second tank was hit and put out of action, Foote continued to lead his battalion despite a tremendous volume of enemy anti-tank fire on his flank. Advancing on foot, he inspired his men to resist German counterthrusts. Foote's personal bravery played a key role in stabilising a tenuous tactical situation that might otherwise have resulted in the encirclement and annihilation of two British combat divisions. It was also a major contributing factor in his receiving the Victoria Cross, the highest award for gallantry in combat

that may be presented to a soldier of the British and Commonwealth armed forces.

A veteran of the Royal Tank Corps, Foote was born the son of an officer in the Royal Artillery in Ishopore, India, in 1904. He joined the British Army in 1925. Records suggest that his heroism on 6 June alone resulted in the award of the Distinguished Service Order, but days of combat still remained.

The fighting on 6 June was one component of a wider action launched on 26 May 1942 by Rommel, who had arrived in North Africa a year earlier, bringing German forces – the vaunted Afrika Korps – with him to support the sagging efforts of the Axis Italian allies. Rommel had inspired a reversal of fortune that saw the Afrika Korps drive the British and Commonwealth forces eastward across hundreds of miles of desert, in a stunning campaign that peaked in November 1941 when the British launched Operation Crusader.

Although nearly abandoned in its early stages, Operation Crusader evolved into a substantial British victory. By mid-January 1942, Rommel had been compelled to retreat and give up much of the ground he had won during his headlong offensive of the previous year. British prime minister Winston Churchill was jubilant and remarked, "Here then we reached a moment of relief, and indeed of rejoicing, about the Desert War."

Churchill was correct with his assessment that relief was momentary – Britain's darkest days of the Desert War were still to come. While supplies were always a primary concern,

"FOOTE WAS ALWAYS AT THE CRUCIAL POINT AT THE RIGHT MOMENT AND OVER A PERIOD OF SEVERAL DAYS GAVE AN EXAMPLE OF OUTSTANDING COURAGE AND LEADERSHIP THAT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFICULT TO SURPASS"

Victoria Cross Citation

"I COULD HAVE BITTEN MY TONGUE OFF WHEN I REALISED I HAD SPOKEN IN ENGLISH. HOWEVER, EVERYONE ELSE WAS TOO BUSY TRYING TO GET ONTO THE TRAIN TO TAKE ANY NOTICE OF US"

Lieutenant Colonel Foote describes boarding an Italian train with other escapees

Lieutenant Colonel Henry Robert Bowreman Foote received the Victoria Cross for heroism during the Battle of Gazala in World War II



Illustration: Dawn Monks



Rommel had gained some relief in the winter of 1941. Japan had declared war on the British Commonwealth, and the demands for resources in other areas around the globe curbed the British allocation of men and equipment to the North African theatre. Meanwhile, Rommel received 54 new tanks in January 1942, along with enough fuel to operate for the foreseeable future.

Rommel set his army – now designated Panzerarmee Afrika – in motion that month. The limited objective of the Axis advance was to forestall a renewal of the British offensive that had recently cost the Germans so dearly. However, early successes encouraged Rommel, and the German effort quickly escalated into a full-scale offensive. Within two weeks, the Germans were again grinding forward from victory to victory, capturing British supply stores and destroying or seizing 40 British tanks and artillery pieces, while killing or capturing 1,400 Commonwealth soldiers.

Setting the stage for Lieutenant Colonel Foote's heroics, the British retired rapidly to prepared defensive positions that included a series of six fortified 'boxes' – positions that were somewhat mutually supportive, stoutly manned and gunned, laced with barbed wire, and ringed with thousands of land mines. Collectively known as the Gazala Line, the

“GENERAL BOB WAS STRAIGHT: A STRAIGHT MAN, STRAIGHT DOWN THE MIDDLE, NO NONSENSE; A MAN OF INTEGRITY AND LOYALTY. I DON'T THINK HE KNEW THE MEANING OF THE WORD DEVIUS”

Allan Taylor, Foote's Obituary,
The Independent Online,
24 December 1993

defences stretched 40 miles from the town of Gazala on the Mediterranean coast south into the desert of Libya. It then curved 20 miles to the north east, terminating at Bir Hakeim.

Following a winter lull, Rommel launched the 26-day offensive that became known as the Battle of Gazala. While elements of Panzerarmee Afrika fought holding actions along the Gazala Line, Rommel personally led

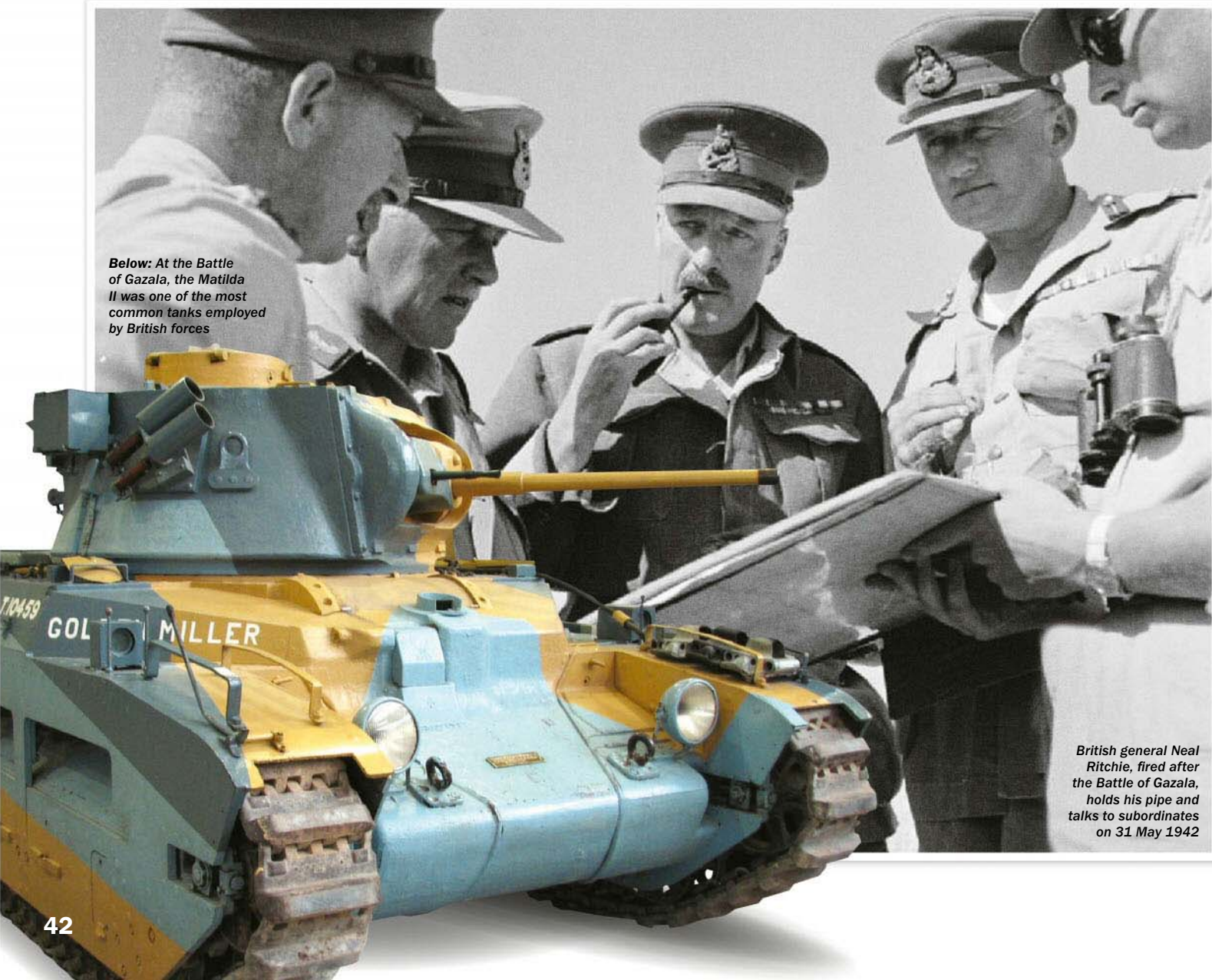
a flanking movement around the bend of the defensive perimeter. Italian units attacked Bir Hakeim, and the initial advance beyond was swift. However, within 48 hours British resistance stiffened. Rommel was short of his objective, but he had established a bridgehead behind the Gazala Line, which came to be known as the 'Cauldron'.

Rommel had blasted a wide breach in the Gazala Line by 1 June, and his supplies flowed freely while indecisive fighting raged in the Cauldron. The Free French garrison at Bir Hakeim stubbornly refused to capitulate. While parrying British counterthrusts in the north, Rommel turned in the opposite direction, shifting considerable weight of arms to finally capture Bir Hakeim on the 10 June. After capturing Bir Hakeim, the Germans reduced the remaining Gazala Line boxes one by one.

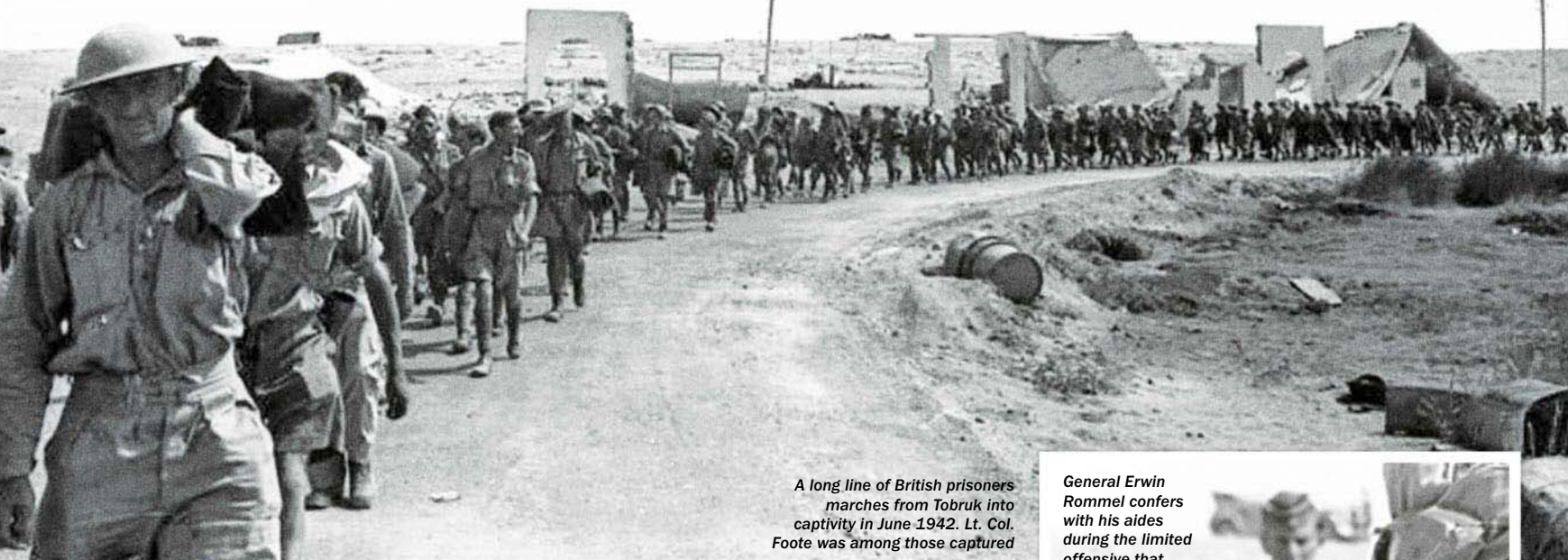
As the Gazala Line began to collapse, the defensive box 'Knightsbridge' was in danger of being cut off and surrounded. It fell to Foote's battalion to maintain a corridor for the Guards Brigade to escape, reorganise and return to the fight. On 13 June Foote's decimated tank battalion stood up to the challenge, emulating the courage of its commander.

Foote called his subordinates together and informed them of the unenviable task. He then walked from vehicle to vehicle to

Below: At the Battle of Gazala, the Matilda II was one of the most common tanks employed by British forces



British general Neal Ritchie, fired after the Battle of Gazala, holds his pipe and talks to subordinates on 31 May 1942



A long line of British prisoners marches from Tobruk into captivity in June 1942. Lt. Col. Foote was among those captured

“DURING THE SUBSEQUENT ASSAULT, FOOTE’S TANK WAS HIT 29 TIMES BY GERMAN SHELLS. ITS GUNS WERE PUT OUT OF ACTION, AND COMMUNICATIONS EQUIPMENT WAS RENDERED USELESS”

offer encouraging words to the weary tankers inside. When the first wave of British armoured vehicles advanced within range, accurate German artillery and anti-tank fire shattered the attack. Foote quickly mustered his remaining tanks and again walked between them to provide instruction and encouragement. All the while German shells were bursting around him.

Retreat was unthinkable, and failure would doom the Guards Brigade to either capture or annihilation. In the most desperate hour, Foote rose to the occasion once again. He jumped aboard a tank, positioned himself high in the turret so that he could be plainly seen by his command and ordered the driver to the head of the British armoured formation. During the subsequent assault, Foote’s tank was hit 29 times by German shells. Its guns were put out of action and communications equipment was rendered useless. Once more the commander hopped to the ground in the middle of the fight. Using hand signals and gestures to direct his remaining tanks, Foote succeeded in holding his battalion together and securing the withdrawal of the Guards Brigade.

Through a combination of inept British senior command, lost opportunities and Rommel’s intrepidity, 13 June 1942 was a disastrous day for the British and Commonwealth forces. However, gallantry such as that displayed by Lieutenant Colonel Foote undoubtedly saved many lives in a rapidly deteriorating situation.

With the collapse of the Gazala Line, Rommel turned his attention towards the great port city of Tobruk, which had previously been in German hands but was abandoned a few months earlier. The German commander wrote, “To every man of us, Tobruk was a symbol of British resistance, and we were now going to finish with it for good.”

The Germans surrounded the city. It fell on 21 June, yielding thousands of tons of supplies, numerous vehicles and 400 big guns. Rommel

addressed a group of prisoners: “Gentlemen, for you the war is over. You have fought like lions and been led by donkeys.” Hitler was elated and promoted Rommel to the rank of field marshal. When he learned of the honour, the Desert Fox wrote to his wife, “I would much rather have been given one more division.”

British theatre commander General Sir Claude Auchinleck fired General Neal Ritchie, commander of the British Eighth Army and took personal charge. The road to the Egyptian capital of Cairo and the Suez Canal seemingly lay open to Rommel. Auchinleck retreated to the railway whistle stop of El Alamein on the Egyptian frontier. The British defensive line was stout, and logistics problems slowed Rommel. Eventually, the British grew stronger while Rommel’s forces – with their supplies of food, ammunition, and fuel dwindling – weakened. In the end, the stunning German victory at Gazala, which officially concluded on 21 June 1942, accomplished little more than facilitating the resounding British triumph at the Second Battle of El Alamein, which followed in October – a turning point of World War II.

As for Lieutenant Colonel Henry Foote, he was among those British troops who surrendered to the Germans at Tobruk. Some time later, he was transported to Italy and managed to escape from a POW camp. Heading for the mountains, Foote located a group of Italian partisans, who referred to him as “Il Colonnello”. He remained with the partisans for several weeks, and then made his way to Switzerland in the spring of 1944. When he reached the neutral country he finally became aware that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross. As the war was coming to an end he returned to Britain and assumed a staff position at Allied headquarters, and in 1945 he was appointed executive officer of the Ninth Armoured Brigade.

After World War II Foote served in various senior roles, including command of the Second

General Erwin Rommel confers with his aides during the limited offensive that spawned the Battle of Gazala



Royal Tank Regiment, command of the Seventh Armoured Brigade, director general of Fighting Vehicles, and director of the Royal Armoured Corps. He retired from active duty in 1958 with the rank of major general.

After his retirement Foote became a trustee of the Tank Museum at Bovington, a position he held until his death at the age of 89 on 11 November 1993. Two years earlier he was a surprise guest on the television show *This Is Your Life*. During the segment he was asked to climb into a tank, which he accomplished with relish. Even then he exuded the optimism and fortitude with which he had achieved lasting fame on the desert battlefield at Gazala more than half a century earlier.

ENTER THE AFRIKA KORPS

The German army's involvement in North Africa was initially a gesture of goodwill in support of Hitler's Axis ally, but it soon turned into a far more vital contribution

WORDS ROB SCHÄFER

Even though the Italian forces in Africa initially outnumbered the British with over five times as many men, their first major engagements with the Allies were rather unsuccessful. The Italians suffered severe casualties and an even worse blow to their morale. At the Battle of Sidi Barrani the Italians lost a staggering 4,500 men killed and wounded and another 38,000 taken prisoner, against total British losses of only 624 men. Their beaten forces were pursued into Libya where, after a short siege, another 45,000 Italians surrendered to the Allies at Bardia.

Only a few weeks later disaster struck again during a brief but intense engagement at Tobruk, where another 27,000 Italian soldiers surrendered. After a relentless pursuit the Italian forces finally surrendered at Beda Fomm on 7 February 1941. Mussolini had lost over 130,000 men, 420 tanks and 845 artillery pieces in only two months of fighting. Germany's intervention on behalf of its inept Italian allies became inevitable.

The first German units arrived in Tripoli on 14 February 1941 and comprised the Vorausabteilung (advance echelon) of the Fifth Light Division and elements of the 15th Panzer Division. It was a small but powerful force, commanded by Erwin Rommel. At this time Rommel was already legendary within army circles

and was a highly respected soldier. During World War I he had received Germany's highest military award, the Pour le Merite, and in the campaign in France at the start of World War II he had further increased his reputation while in command of the Seventh Panzer Division. The men under his command were experienced, but they had never fought in the waterless heat of the African desert.

"Then the ever-present wind turned into a storm and an enormous wall of sand approached from the south: a 'Ghibli', a much-feared sandstorm killed all activity for three days. Sand and dust got everywhere, even inside our wristwatches. We wrapped our heads in scarves and laid down. Nothing else could be done to survive. We could hardly eat, always biting on sand. Then it was over as suddenly as it came."

Richard Heidegger, 33rd Artillery Regiment

Knowing that a British offensive was to be expected at any time, and aware of the extent to which the exhausted British forces had been overstretched and dispersed during the campaign against the Italians, Rommel immediately committed his forces. True to his reputation as a daring and aggressive field commander, Rommel missed no opportunity to hit the British and launched his forces against the strategically important port of Tobruk.

*'Our first day on the African continent'
- German soldiers pose in newly issued
tropical uniforms*



*Light howitzer crew
training in the desert*



*Brand new Panzer IV F models in the desert.
With their long 75mm guns they outclassed
every Allied tank fielded in the African theatre of
war. Yet numbers delivered were always low*



"THE MEN UNDER HIS COMMAND WERE EXPERIENCED, BUT THEY HAD NEVER FOUGHT IN THE WATERLESS HEAT OF THE AFRICAN DESERT"



*Panzer tanks cross the
desert. The turret hatch
was often left open to
improve visibility in the
desert, but it put the crew
in greater danger*



Illustration: Jean-Michel Girard, The Art Agency

Left: An Afrika Korps soldier with goggles and a scarf to protect against sandstorms, and a cap to protect against the sun. Nature was often the harshest enemy in the desert



Cleaning dust from rifles was a daily routine

"The men had to lie prone in the cover of a depression in the ground. It was impossible even to raise your head, as the enemy was well within rifle range - all this under the merciless heat of the sun, with temperatures in excess of 40 degrees by day and a cold 10 degrees during the night. Bringing in supplies like water, rations and ammunition, just as with the evacuation of wounded, could only happen at night. Because of the unhygienic situation, the ever-present flies and the sudden temperature drops during the evenings all men suffered from diarrhoea and had to relieve themselves into the positions they were sheltering in, which in turn brought even more flies. Due to the dwindling supply of often-unsuitable rations the men got weaker by the day."
Oberleutnant Werner Hundt, 200th Panzer-Pioneer Battalion

After a hard-fought engagement at El Agheila, British troops were forced back to Mersa Brega. Ignoring Hitler's orders not to engage in major operations, Rommel split his troops, dispatching a part of the Fifth Light Division towards Benghazi while the remaining force pushed



Palm tree and swastika, the symbol of the Afrika Korps

on through the desert in the direction of El Mechili. It was a gamble that paid off when Benghazi fell on 4 April 1941 and El Mechili was captured three days later.

The fortified coastal town of Tobruk proved to be a tougher nut to crack for the outnumbered Afrika Korps, and the garrison of 35,000 Australian troops repelled all German attacks with relative ease. Yet the German force under command of the Desert Fox had achieved a major success by driving the British out of Cyrenaica in less than two weeks.

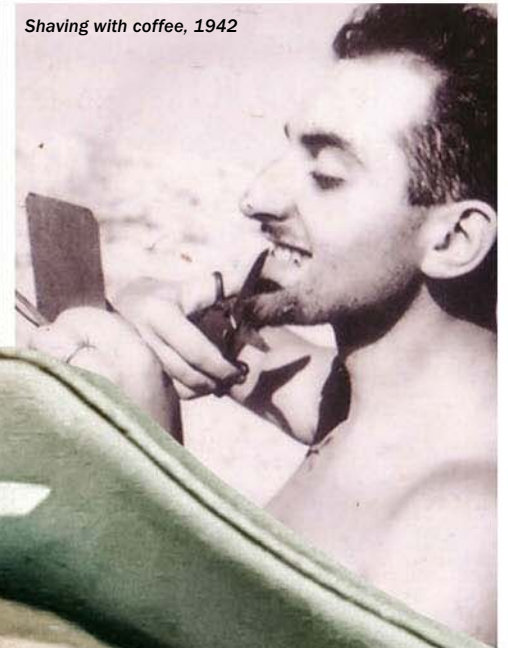
"It was beginning to get dark. Who is an enemy [or a] friend? Projectiles are humming through the air around us and it's difficult to say who fired them and who they are aimed against. Suddenly a radio message! The British are attacking the gap with infantry. It is true; two companies are disembarking their armoured personnel carriers to engage in battle.

All sorts of flares rise into the sky - green, red, white. Some of them land in the area of our machine guns. It is already too dark to aim properly, nevertheless the enemy made a mistake to attack. The small flamethrower-armed Fiat Ansaldo tanks roll forward to clear the triangle ahead of us. Long jets of flame, thick smoke, terrible stench! We secure our position up until 23.45 and then begin to withdraw. A hell of a drive through thick dust. At 3.00am we have a snack next to our tank, which we had been locked in to for the last 24

"THE FORTIFIED COASTAL TOWN OF TOBRUK PROVED TO BE A TOUGHER NUT TO CRACK FOR THE OUTNUMBERED AFRIKA KORPS, AND THE GARRISON OF 35,000 AUSTRALIAN TROOPS REPELLED ALL GERMAN ATTACKS WITH RELATIVE EASE"

Camouflaged gun position, autumn 1942

Shaving with coffee, 1942



hours. We have terrible pain in our joints and severe muscle cramps.”
Leutnant Karl Schorm, Fifth Panzer Regiment

COUNTER STRIKES & CRUSADER

In May 1941 the British launched an offensive with the aim of recapturing the lost positions at Sollum, Capuzzo and Halfaya. The operation, codenamed ‘Brevity’, was initially successful. However, the British were pushed out again less than two weeks later. In June ‘Operation Battleaxe’ was launched in an attempt to finally relieve the Tobruk garrison. Reinforced by a large number of tanks and aircraft, it lasted only three days. At Halfaya, British tanks were torn apart by powerful German 88mm flak guns, and on 16 June Rommel launched a counterattack, that pushed the British back into Egypt. A period of relative inactivity ensued, which lasted for several months. Both sides used this lull to replenish and rest their exhausted forces. The fortress of Tobruk still held out, supplied by sea while the Germans dug in to await another relief attempt.

On 18 November 1941 the Allies launched another offensive, two days before a planned German attack on Tobruk. The British had learned about Rommel’s plans and German troop dispositions through intercepted coded German radio traffic by ‘Ultra’. The British aimed to cut off the Axis positions at Halfaya and Bardia by striking through the desert between Tobruk and the Egyptian frontier, providing a launch point for the relief of Tobruk.

By now Rommel’s forces were facing unfavourable odds. More than 730 British tanks had been assembled to engage 390 Axis tanks, 150 of which were of Italian manufacture and completely outclassed. The Allied offensive made good progress, but in the desert Allied armour failed to draw the German tanks into battle and became dangerously

dispersed. Sidi Rezegh was taken but immediately lost when a German counter attack hit the Allies from two sides. Over 200 British tanks were lost. Fighting raged on for another three weeks, with no side gaining a decisive advantage.

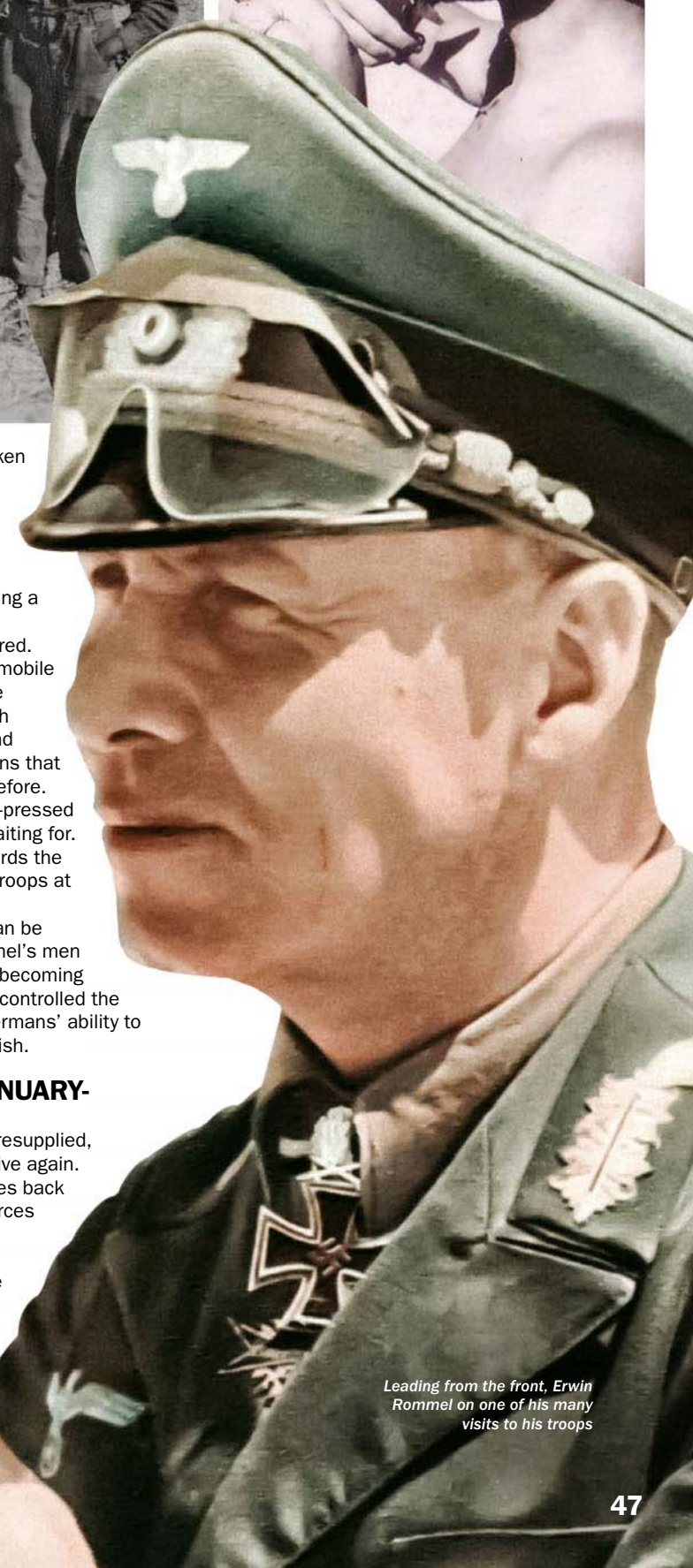
At this point Rommel blundered. Drawing off a large part of his mobile forces, including 100 tanks, he surged out to harass the British rear – dangerously exposing and weakening a number of positions that had been captured just days before. This was the moment the hard-pressed garrison of Tobruk had been waiting for. The defenders sallied out towards the east and linked up with Allied troops at El Duda.

The outcome of the battle can be described as a draw, yet Rommel’s men had suffered losses that were becoming difficult to replace. The British controlled the Mediterranean Sea and the Germans’ ability to resupply slowly began to diminish.

THE FOX STRIKES: JANUARY-JUNE 1942

Having sufficiently rested and resupplied, Axis forces went on the offensive again. German forces pushed the Allies back towards Gazala while Italian forces raced towards Benghazi.

After a necessary period of rest Rommel intended to strike towards Tobruk again. In May 1942 he engaged the Eighth Army in battle after swinging around the left of the British lines and steadily



Leading from the front, Erwin Rommel on one of his many visits to his troops

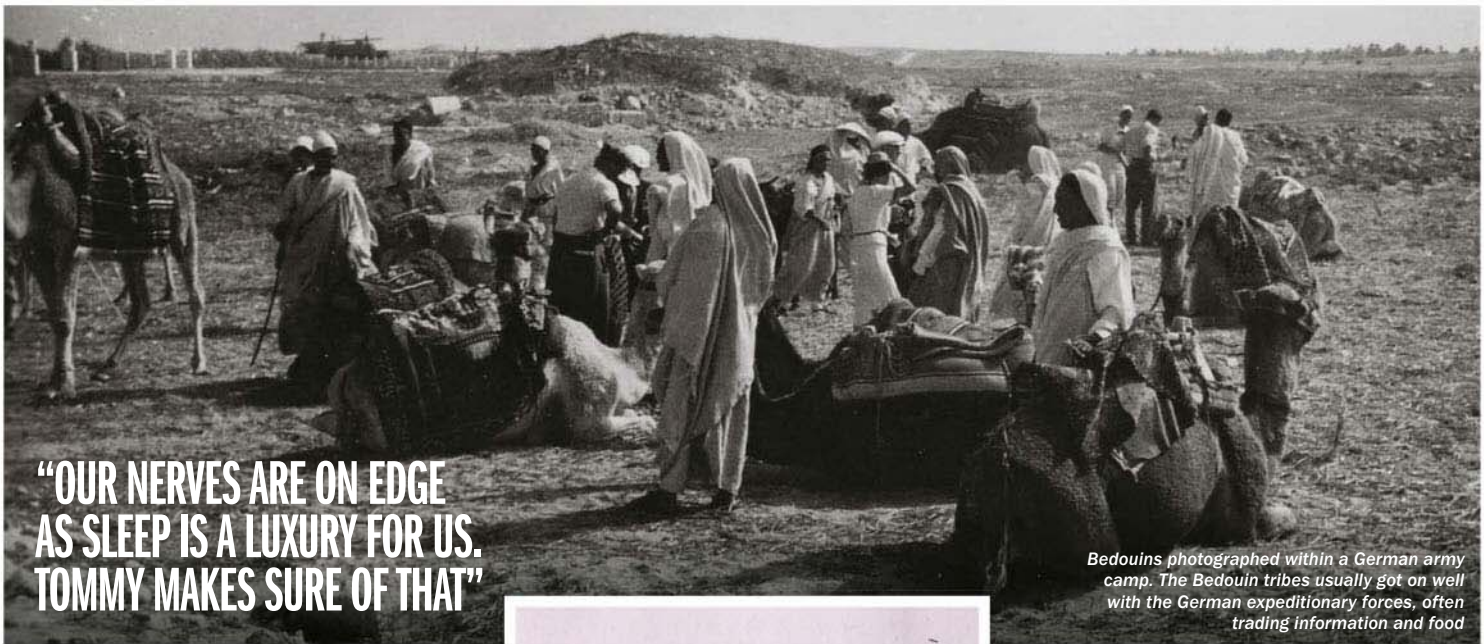
German soldier wearing dust goggles and a scarf around the head for protection against a sandstorm

“THE SHELL WENT IN AT THE FRONT AND CAME OUT AT THE BACK – PROOF OF THE POWER OF THE NEW ENGLISH TANKS”

“The area was littered with the wrecks of destroyed tanks. Tommy always kept out of the range of our guns while taking us under fire himself. At that time their tanks’ guns were longer and had a better range than ours. For the first time we felt the material superiority of the enemy. A Panzer commander was killed by infantry fire – headshot. Due to the heat in the Panzer and because of the low visibility we often fought with the commander’s turret hatch open. I did it all the time – no chance to see anything otherwise – but that meant the commander had to turn his head into an inviting target. One Panzer was hit on the turret. The shell went in at the front and came out at the back – proof of the power of the new English tanks. From that time on we always tried to mount some pieces of track to the front armour.

“Tommy was constantly trying to disturb our radio communications; he had somehow

got hold of our frequencies and now suddenly started blathering to distract us. In the evening I spoke to a battery commander, who told me that he only had 30 shells left to fire and that he didn’t expect to receive any resupply soon. On 2 November my unit was called up to block an enemy breakthrough. The defensive fire that greeted us was so strong that our infantry was being pinned down and had to remain behind. Oberleutnant Dubois was killed by a headshot, when they brought him in later they didn’t even want to show him to me. It must be a terrible sight. Two more times we try to throw Tommy back, but every time our attack falters. An 88mm flak gun is brought forward and shot to pieces before the crew even had time to deploy. Then we are being plastered with a rain of mortar shells. A 2cm flak gun is hit, the four men of the crew lie on the ground wounded.”
Hans Sedelmayr, Eighth Panzer Regiment



“OUR NERVES ARE ON EDGE AS SLEEP IS A LUXURY FOR US. TOMMY MAKES SURE OF THAT”

Bedouins photographed within a German army camp. The Bedouin tribes usually got on well with the German expeditionary forces, often trading information and food



Captured British vehicles in German service



pushed them back. However, Bir Hakeim, to the south of his position, managed to resist all Italian attempts to capture it and Axis supplies again ran low.

Low-level attacks by the Royal Air Force and an enormous British minefield severely hampered the mobility of Rommel's troops. The French defenders at Bir Hakeim were finally forced out when a German division and intense Luftwaffe support was sent to aid the Italians. The Axis supply routes were secure once more.

Again Rommel targeted Tobruk. By now the Germans were well-acquainted with the British defences and attacked before the defenders could properly prepare. On 21 June 1942 Tobruk finally fell into German hands, along with an enormous store of supplies. It was a demoralising blow to the British. Rommel was promoted to Feldmarschall (Field Marshal) and obtained Hitler's permission to pursue the British into Egypt.

German troops crossed the Egyptian border on 23 June 1942. At Mersa Matruh the Germans surrounded a numerically far superior British force of 20,000 men. The New Zealand Division, overestimating the strength of the Germans, broke out towards the east and opened Rommel's path towards Alexandria. The only obstacle in his way was a natural defensive position along a line south from El Alamein. Protected by the sea to the north and the impassable Qattara Depression – an enormous desert plain covered by salt pans, sand dunes

and salt marshes – to the south, it formed a narrow strip of land that was well-fortified and easily protected. On 30 June 1942 German armour ran into the first defensive minefields, and more than four weeks of intensive fighting followed, during which neither side prevailed.

On 30 August Rommel launched another attack with the intention to punch through the southern end of the British line and then swing around behind their positions. Yet the British were again prepared thanks to the interception of coded German radio messages. All along the Alam Halfa ridge tanks and artillery pieces had been dug in to welcome the German attackers. When the first German Panzers ran into the British minefields the trap was sprung. Pounded by tank and artillery fire and hunted down by British fighter-bombers, the Germans took severe casualties.

1 September 1942

“It was a terrible night. From 22.30 there was heavy rolling enemy air attacks, without doubt the most severe I have experienced in Africa. At least 15 vehicles are burned out. Another 20 are completely destroyed by splinters. About 20 of us, I think, have been killed. A lot more have been wounded.

In the morning 54 bombers attacked a neighbouring battlegroup in three waves. I could see four enormous columns of white smoke rising up into the sky. In the night I have lost my coat and had to sit in the cold with only my

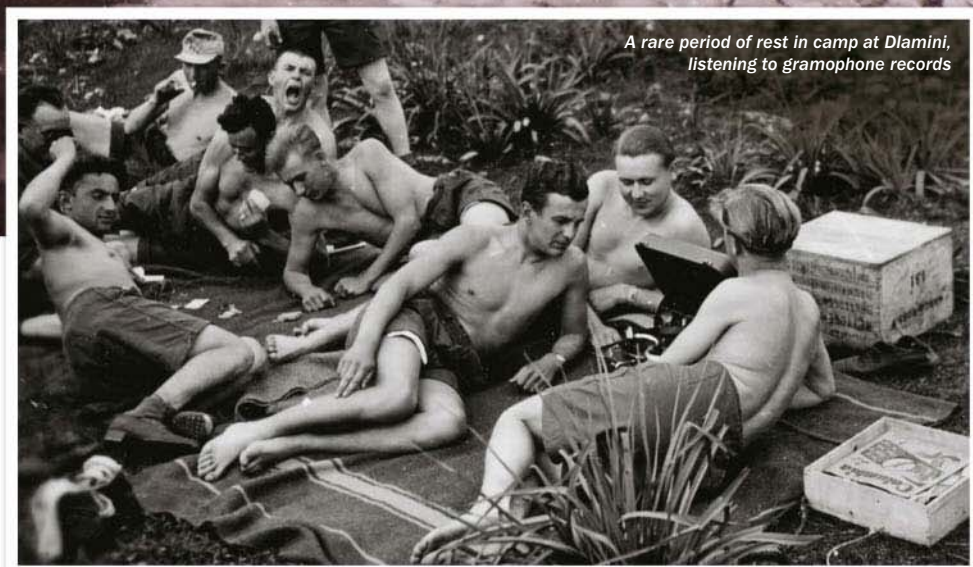
trousers and jacket. Not a great experience. Nearby, about 20 to 40 metres away, five to eight bombs detonated. Our nerves are on edge as sleep is a luxury for us. Tommy makes sure of that. Yesterday evening we saw 40 Stukas attacking the enemy.”

Karl Reinhard, 155th Panzergrenadier Reg.

By now Rommel's health had deteriorated. He faltered, withdrew his forces and left for Germany on sick leave on 23 September. His troops, surprised by their commander's decision to withdraw, were ordered to dig in, while all along the front German lines were secured by gun positions and minefields. One month later, after an artillery barrage of an intensity that rivalled those seen in the great battles of World War I, General Montgomery launched the offensive that Rommel had been expecting. Two days later, on 25 October, Rommel returned to the front. Montgomery now engaged in a war of attrition, knowing full well that German supplies and reserves were dwindling at an alarming rate. With a battle of attrition he would wear the Germans down by sheer weight of numbers.

In the fighting that followed, the British suffered over 10,000 casualties in less than five days, yet German lines remained unbroken. However, by this point German reserves had been committed and supplies were running out. On 4 November Rommel finally had to accept defeat, and German troops began to withdraw.

Afrika Korps soldiers in the desert. The heat during the day was a constant problem, and often fighting would be less intense around midday



A rare period of rest in camp at Dlamini, listening to gramophone records

“VON ARNIM SENT A MESSAGE TO ROME REPORTING THAT HIS COMMAND POST WAS SURROUNDED ON TWO SIDES, AFTER WHICH HE APPROACHED THE ALLIES WITH A SURRENDER OFFER”

HEIA SAFARI – THE END OF THE AFRIKA KORPS

Only days after the decision was made to withdraw, American and British forces landed in Algeria and Morocco, trapping Rommel’s forces between two fronts and leaving no option but to withdraw further to Tunisia and from there attempt to evacuate to Sicily. Being well acquainted with Rommel’s style of command and the fighting capabilities of his troops, Montgomery remained cautious while Rommel conducted a skilful withdrawal, which ended at the Mareth Line in February 1943.

By this time the tide had turned again in favour of the outnumbered and ill-supplied Germans, as Montgomery had seriously overstretched his supply lines. In the west General von Arnim and General Nehring successfully defended the western Tunisian front against Allied forces advancing from Algeria, while the Luftwaffe had temporarily established local air superiority over the German bridgehead in Tunisia.

On 14 February 1943 Rommel launched Unternehmen Morgenluft – ‘Operation Morning Air’ – a concentrated attack on the American forces in the west. The depleted Tenth and 21st Panzer Divisions smashed into the advancing enemy in the area of Sidi bou Zid, inflicting severe losses on the inexperienced American troops and easily swatting aside a counterattack mounted the next day.

Six days later Rommel led the attack with 10th and 15th Panzer Divisions and captured the Kasserine Pass, routing the US troops trying to resist. It was a spectacular advance, which was again stalled by a lack of supplies. Rommel then launched his troops at the British attacking Medenine on the Mareth Line, but British intelligence had once again intercepted German radio communications and the defenders were awaiting the German attack in well-prepared defensive positions. The attack was repelled and the German forces incurred heavy losses.

At the beginning of March Rommel was recalled to Germany and replaced by General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim, who continued to engage the advancing Allied forces in delaying actions wherever possible.

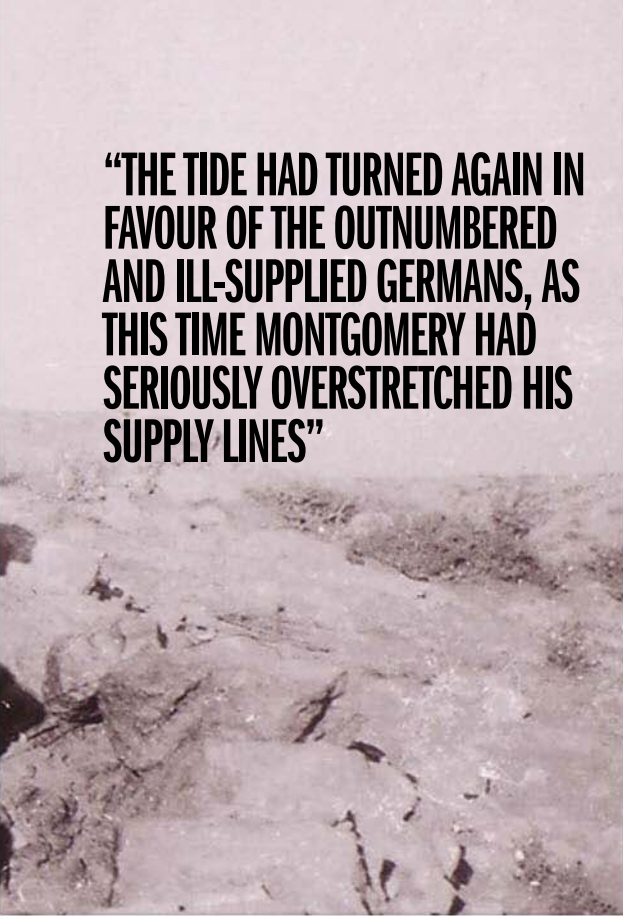
On 12 May 1943 Von Arnim sent a message to Rome reporting that his command post was surrounded on two sides, after which he approached the Allies with a surrender offer. After the surrender 24,0000 men of Rommel’s desert army marched into captivity and into the annals of military history.

General Hans Cramer radioed the final message of the Afrika Korps. It read:

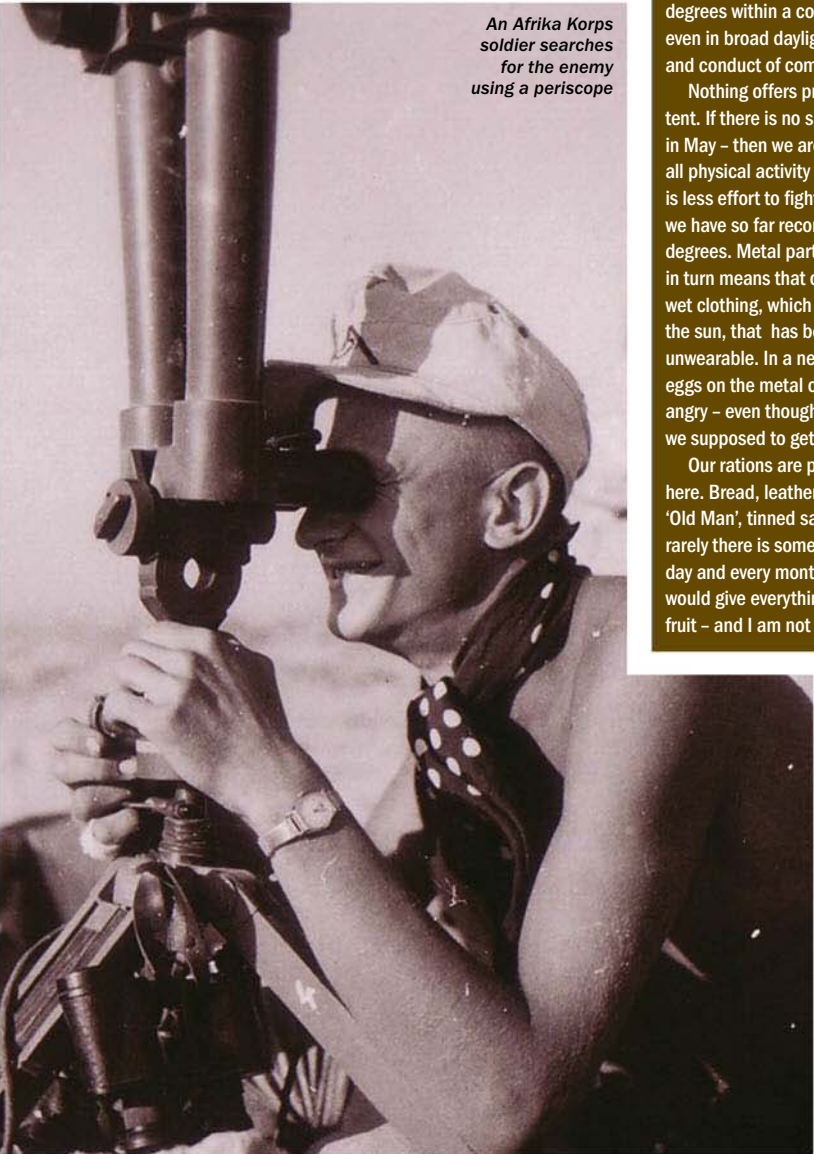
“To German High Command: Ammunition expended. Arms and equipment destroyed. In accordance with orders received the Afrika Korps has fought itself into the condition where it can fight no more. The Afrika Korps must rise again. Heia Safari!”

Images: Alamy

“THE TIDE HAD TURNED AGAIN IN FAVOUR OF THE OUTNUMBERED AND ILL-SUPPLIED GERMANS, AS THIS TIME MONTGOMERY HAD SERIOUSLY OVERSTRETCHED HIS SUPPLY LINES”



An Afrika Korps soldier searches for the enemy using a periscope



IN THIS REVEALING TESTAMENT, OBERLEUTNANT HARALD KUHN, OF THE FIFTH PANZER REGIMENT, EXPLAINS THE DIFFULTIES MEN FACED WHILE FIGHTING IN THE HARSH DESERT CONDITIONS

THE REAL ENEMY

In Africa our real enemy is nature. Sandstorms are a constant danger. The worst kind of sandstorm is the Ghibli, which differs from the common sandstorm because of the direction from which it approaches and travels. It always strikes from the south, and within it temperatures can reach up to 60 degrees. If a Ghibli lasts throughout the day it can happen that it suddenly changes direction in the evening, after which the temperatures can drop by 30 degrees within a couple of minutes. Sandstorms blind you, even in broad daylight so they often dictate the success and conduct of combat operations.

Nothing offers protection against the sand, not even a tent. If there is no sandstorm – the worst storms pass over in May – then we are tormented by the heat. It is so hot that all physical activity ceases at noon. Even in battle there is less effort to fight at midday. The highest temperatures we have so far recorded here have been as high as 75 degrees. Metal parts become impossible to touch, which in turn means that our mechanics can't work. I have seen wet clothing, which had been placed on a tank to dry in the sun, that has been scorched so much that it became unwearable. In a newsreel I have seen comrades frying eggs on the metal of their tank's turret. That made me angry – even though it is possible, where in God's name are we supposed to get eggs from? Or fat to fry them in?

Our rations are probably the most terrible thing out here. Bread, leathery beef in tins, which we all know as 'Old Man', tinned sardines in oil and dried vegetables. Very rarely there is some vitamins in the form of lemons. Every day and every month we have the same kind of food. We would give everything for some fresh meat, vegetables or fruit – and I am not even mentioning eggs.



Stahlhelm (steel helmet) and dust goggles. They provided protection against enemy fire and the threat of nature

In the very best case we can buy some old onions or a melon, which we have to buy from an Arab who will charge us a fortune for them. There is some fantastic food in the stores at Benghazi and Tripoli, donations from the Fatherland in the form of tinned fruit, ham and luxuries like Champagne! But this was all being saved for better times – up to the point when it was all captured by the British, who then blew up the stores and the supplies contained within them. The only stores that were saved in time were the 'proper' army rations – 'old man', sardines in oil and dried vegetables. German army efficiency! When listening to radio broadcasts, we all dream of hearing the sound of a young woman taking a bath in a tub filled with fresh water. For us Africans those two things are the most elusive and important – water and women. But let's not talk about the latter and have a chat about water.

The water from Derna is the best in Africa, yet this never reaches us. Our water comes from a small well, which we have drilled ourselves. Wells like this are distributed throughout the desert, hours apart from one another, and they deliver salty, brackish water. This is filled into metal canisters, which even though they are coated with a layer of red protective paint are being eaten away by rust. The water contained in them needs to be boiled before consumption, so what we get in the end is a dark brown, salty, hot broth. You can last a long time until you are thirsty enough to voluntarily drink that stuff – and THAT is a positive thing.

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Left: Alf Jackson in his official army portrait during WWII. A member of the Desert Rats, Jackson went on to serve in Italy after North Africa

INTERVIEW WITH ALF JACKSON

DISCOVERING ROMMEL'S HQ

Alf Jackson tells the story of how he came across what was probably the Desert Fox's abandoned headquarters, as well as a mysterious artefact

WORDSTOM GARNER

In the aftermath of the Second Battle of El Alamein, the Afrika Korps was in full retreat, and in the chaos of withdrawal the Germans had to abandon countless pieces of equipment and personal items. Following closely behind were the advancing Allied forces, including Driver Alf Jackson of the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC). Jackson had the vital task of transporting water to frontline troops, but after

El Alamein he was part of an RASC convoy passing through the Halfaya Pass near the Egypt-Libya border.

Known as 'Hellfire Pass', the high escarpment area had been a strategically vital thoroughfare for both sides before El Alamein. After Jackson passed through, he chanced upon a large abandoned German camp, which he

believes was Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's recently abandoned desert headquarters. Now aged 96, Jackson recalls the eerie tale of how he discovered an elaborate and rare Nazi victory plaque, in the ghostly heart of the Desert Fox's operations.

WHEN DID YOU JOIN THE BRITISH ARMY AND WHAT DID YOUR TASKS AS A DRIVER CONSIST OF?

I originally got my papers when I was 19, but it got delayed until I was 20. I then went to Scotland, and we got on the ship and finished up in the desert in 1941. I served about a year and three quarters in the desert. I was on water supplies for most of the time, right up until we got to Tripoli, and then we drove all the way back down to Egypt before we finished up in Italy.

WHAT DID THE RASC DO DURING THE SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN?

We weren't at the battle itself, we were supplying water. We were coming up at the tail end of the battle driving water tankers. Soldiers would come back with their empty cans, drop them off and pick up full cans for the frontline troops. We were not actually in the battle line, but we weren't far off.

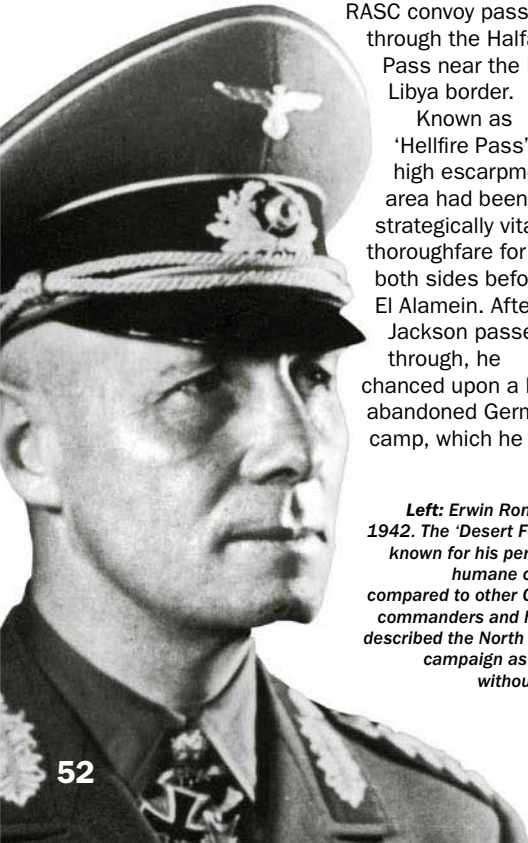
WHAT WERE THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED TO YOU DISCOVERING ROMMEL'S HEADQUARTERS IN THE HALFAYA PASS?

We were carrying water when we got to Halfaya Pass. We couldn't use the pass because the Germans had blown it up, so we had to come over the rocky desert. How the tyres on the lorries withstood it I don't know, but we were

loaded up with flimsy two-gallon cans of water that used to leak.

Just as we got to the top of the hill, almost into Halfaya, there were hundreds of German and Italian prisoners surrounding us. The Germans were shouting out, "Drinking wasser! Drinking wasser!" They were asking for drinking water, and of course we were carrying it all. There were two of us on the truck, and a lot of these cans leaked, so the other driver said, "By the time we get going these cans will be empty. Give them the leakers." There were hundreds of Germans surrounding us – we couldn't move. I went into the back of the truck to sort the leaking cans and gave them to the Germans. They thanked us and off they went. Hundreds of them walked back down to our lines to give themselves up, but when

"HIS EYES WERE OPEN, BUT HE WAS DEAD, WHICH WAS A SHOCK BECAUSE I THOUGHT HE WAS ALIVE. IF THEY WERE CAPTURED THEY ALL HAD MEANS TO TAKE POISONED TABLETS. I THINK THAT HE COULDN'T GET AWAY SO HE JUST SAT THERE AND TOOK THE POISON"

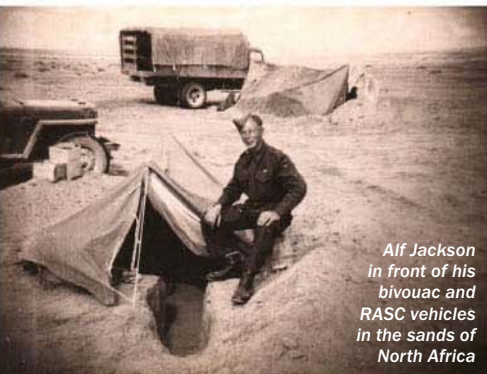
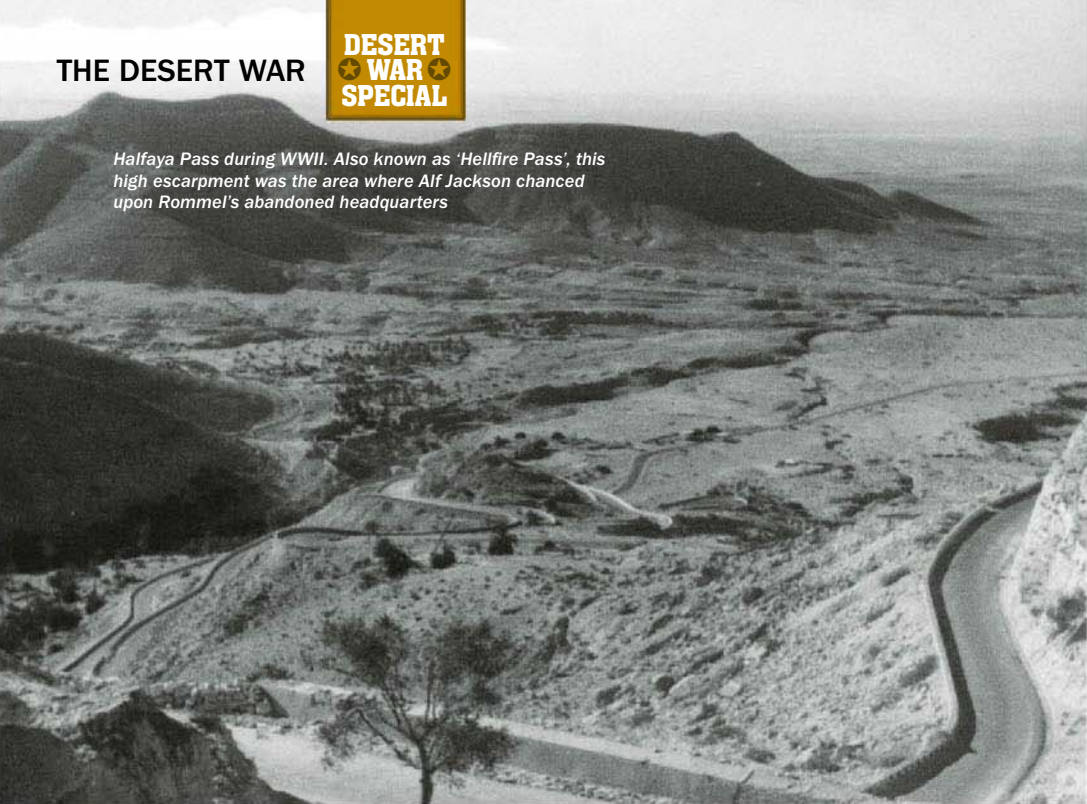


Left: Erwin Rommel in 1942. The 'Desert Fox' was known for his personally humane conduct compared to other German commanders and he even described the North African campaign as a "War without Hate"



Alf Jackson discovered this elaborate wood and enamel plaque near Halfaya Pass in 1942. Subsequent research has shown that it is a Kriegsmarine plaque that would have been distributed to German troops later in the war. However, the plaques were unissued and are consequently rare, with only a few being known to have been taken by British soldiers

Halfaya Pass during WWII. Also known as 'Hellfire Pass', this high escarpment was the area where Alf Jackson chanced upon Rommel's abandoned headquarters



Alf Jackson in front of his bivouac and RASC vehicles in the sands of North Africa



Driver Alf Jackson next to a Jeep in the North African desert. Jackson's work with the Royal Army Service Corps provided vital water supplies to soldiers on the frontline



Alf Jackson (seated, left) with fellow soldiers and an Egyptian girl in Ezbekiyya Gardens, Cairo

we got over the top into Rommel's camp the South Africans were already there.

WHAT DID YOU SEE IN THE CAMP?

We stopped and got out. There was a small German monoplane with a black cross and green camouflage parked on grass. Can you imagine grass in the desert? It looked ready to take off, but the engine wasn't running.

I walked up to the side door and to my surprise and shock there was a German officer sitting there at the controls. He was a big fella, and I think he was Rommel's second-in-command. He wore a full blue-green uniform with all the decorations and peak cap. His eyes were open but he was dead, which was a shock because I thought he was alive. If they were captured they all had means to take poisoned tablets. I think that he couldn't get away so he just sat there and took the poison.

WHAT MANNER OF ITEMS DID YOU DISCOVER IN THE CAMP?

Rommel's big white tents were there, and I turned around and went into the entrance. In front of the tents was a concrete pathway, and lined up on either side were officers' backpacks all ready to be put on vehicles to be taken away with them. But of course they were all captured, and their kit was still lined up on this pathway in front of the tents.

I knew they were officers' backpacks because they had a fur backing to them, and

it was only officers that had fur backing. All their personal belongings were still in them. One had a shaving tin and I took the lid off, and there was this beautiful wristwatch in there still running. I didn't want it so I put it back again.

HOW DID YOU DISCOVER THE PLAQUE?

When I came to the end of this row of backpacks there were several boxes on top of one another, and I could see that there was tissue paper sticking out. I wondered what they were and went to have a look. I pulled one out and discovered this plaque.

There were hundreds of them, but I don't know what they were going to do with them. I suppose they were going to issue them to officers, because underneath the enamel design there is a space, but there are no names on them. I took one and brought it home with me. It was something you'd never dream of seeing in the middle of the desert.

WHAT ARE THE DETAILS ON THE PLAQUE?

It's marvellously done and not very big at about four inches [10cm] across and seven-eight inches [18-22cm] down. According to this plaque they'd invaded Britain along with all the other European countries that they'd invaded. All the invaded countries are in red, including England. Of course they didn't do it, but it just shows you the way their minds worked. It had already been made and they hadn't even invaded us!

On the water between the two countries is a gunboat that has the tip of the gun pointing at London. Right across the whole thing is the Afrika Korps symbol, which is a palm tree. On the top of the whole picture is a German eagle and at the bottom is a swastika.

HAVE ANY EXPERTS BEEN ABLE TO WORK OUT ITS IMPORTANCE OR VALUE?

I took it to the BBC's *Antiques Roadshow*, and the chap looked at it and said, 'Do you know, I think I've seen a couple like these before, but the chaps that had them didn't know where they'd found them.' I said, 'Well, this one came from Rommel's headquarters, and this is where they were.' But they didn't use it on the programme so it never got shown. They had no idea what it was worth; all they knew was what they could see in front of them. It was probably an award of some sort, but at the time there was no one there to ask because the camp was empty.

AT THE TIME WHAT WAS YOUR OPINION OF ROMMEL AS A COMMANDER?

Apparently he was a gentleman from what we'd heard about him. We weren't that scared of him as a general or a man; [in that way] he was a bit like Montgomery.

They used to say to us when we were going up the line that if we got captured [Rommel would] hand you a cup of tea and send you back again!

Images: Alf Jackson, Getty



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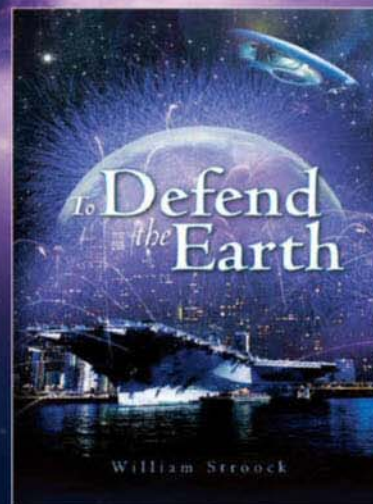
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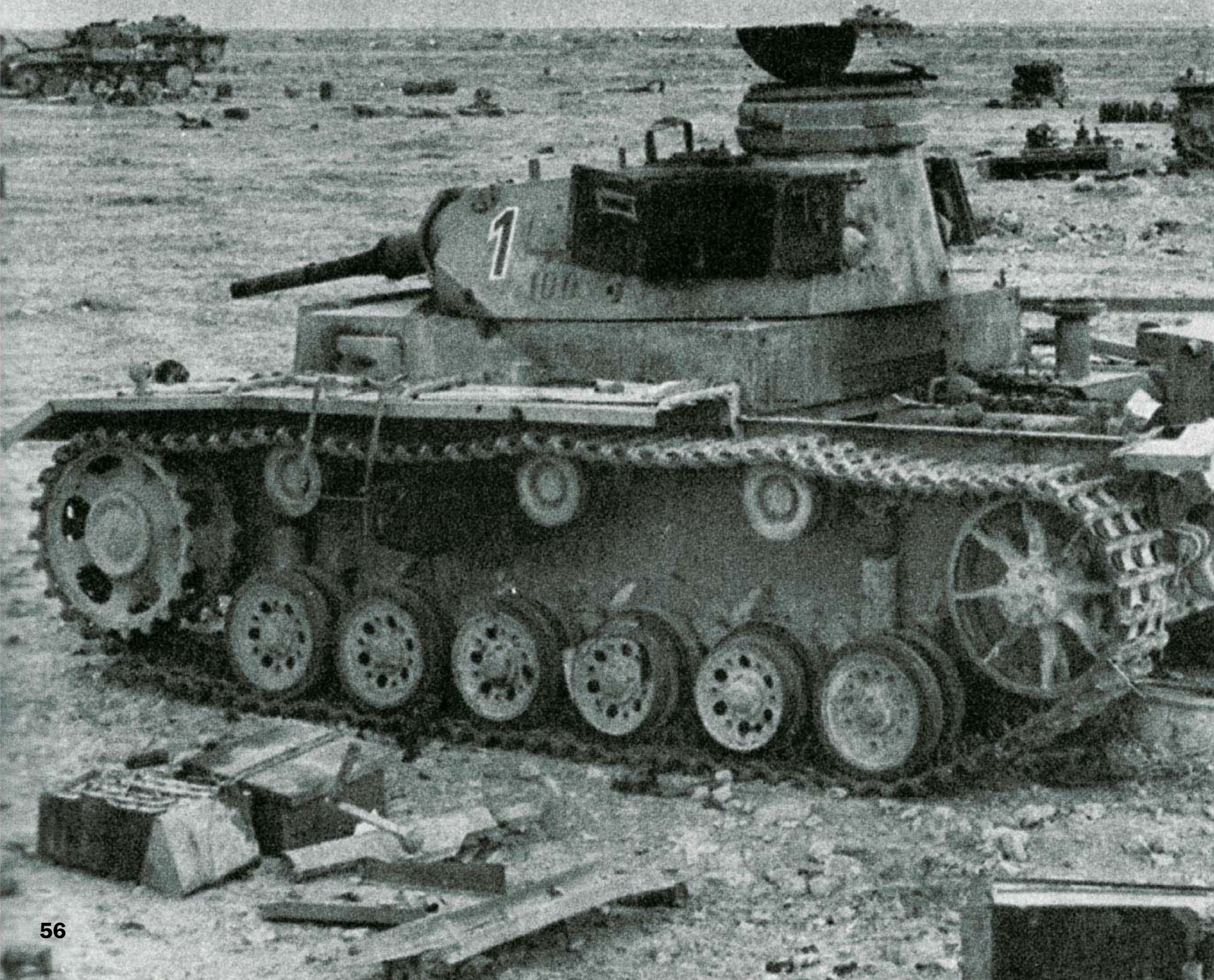
Right: Burritt was part of the advanced party to land on Juno Beach on 6 June 1944 and was awarded the Légion d'honneur by the French government in 2014, along with all other surviving veterans of D-Day



WORDS TOM GARNER

THE ORIGINAL DESERT RAT

Len Burritt coined the famous nickname of the Seventh Armoured Division and had a remarkable career as the personal wireless operator for British generals in North Africa



It is February 1940, and a young British signalman is assisting his general in the Western Desert. The general is the second man to command a newly formed armoured division, and at that moment his men are relatively untested in battle.

At one point a local boy passes by with a pet jerboa. The unusual-looking rodent is quick and nimble, and it catches the eye of the general, who finds inspiration in its flexible mobility. The commander decides to call his new force 'The Jerboa Division', but the signalman, who has also witnessed the scene, suggests a catchier name. In that moment a legendary formation is created: 'The Desert Rats'.

First assembled in 1938 as the Mobile Division in Egypt, what later became the Seventh Armoured Division fought in most of the major battles in the prolonged and hard-fought Western Desert Campaign, before moving on to campaign in Europe, in Italy, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and finally

Germany. The division became one of the most famous British forces of World War II, and the man who coined its distinctive nickname was the young signalman, Len Burritt.

Burritt joined the Royal Corps of Signals aged 18 in the 'Abdication Crisis' year of 1936 and went on to become involved in over 100 battles in 15 countries during the war. By 1945 he had been mentioned in dispatches twice for his meritorious actions in the face of the enemy, in both North Africa and Europe. His prolific service was largely due to his work as the personal wireless operator for the first commanders of the Seventh Armoured Division. The majority of his battles were fought in North Africa.

Now aged 99, Burritt tells the remarkable story of a long, harsh, desolate war where survival was often measured in pints of water or a simple Morse code message. It is a unique insider's view of the British high command in North Africa from the perspective of the original Desert Rat.

Joining up

Burritt was born in Kent on 28 August 1918 during the 'Hundred Days Offensive' that would finally bring an end to World War I. His upbringing had been rural but practical. "I was in farming before I went into the army, and my dad won every major county show in England three or four times at least."

Burritt learned to drive a five-ton lorry when he was only 14 and a motorcycle when he was 15, but a few years later he decided to join the British Army. "I joined a week before I was 18 in 1936. My father used to manage an estate, but I wanted a change of life and thought, 'I'll go and join the army and see the world', and that is what I did."

Aged just 17, Burritt was technically still a minor, but the recruiting sergeant viewed things differently. "I joined up at Cleethorpes in Lincolnshire. Because it was a week before I turned 18 the colour sergeant said to me, 'You see that tower (which was actually a lighthouse) down there? Go and walk down there and come



Damaged panzers in the aftermath of the Battle of Sidi Rezegh, November 1941. Burritt recalls not sleeping for days on end during the battle

back and tell me how old you are.' So I gained a week! Then he gave me a king's shilling and a rail ticket to Catterick, where I went and started my depot training for E Company, which was wireless training."

Burritt had joined the Royal Corps of Signals in No. 42 Squad and was put through rigorous training by an experienced NCO. "He was a very tough task master during the day, but at night he would lean against the coal-stove fireplace, which was in the centre of the barrack room and tell us what he'd done in India. But during the day he was the top man of the instructors in the depot. In fact we won a shield that year so that proves something."

As well as working to complete his training, Burritt also found time to take part in an adventurous extra-curricular activity: "I did a turn before I ever went abroad or left the training camp in England for the 'White Helmets', who were the Signals' motorbike display team. They're now known for wearing white helmets, but when I was there they had peaked caps and chinstraps. They knew I could ride a motorbike, and they were short of one man for the Richmond tournament, so I gave a display. I put a plank against an Austin 7 car and jumped over it! Then I put a four-rung ladder on the back of a motorbike and strapped up. I used to stand on the petrol tank and then the saddle and climb up backwards on this ladder at 28 miles per hour and then down again. But I'd had good training because I used to learn with a man who won the Isle of Man race three times when I was 15."

Nevertheless, Burritt's services were soon required elsewhere, and he was deployed to North Africa where he would remain for the next five years.

Pre-war preparations

Unlike most who served during World War II, Burritt was sent on active service before war had even broken out. His destination was Egypt, where the most dangerous threat to British interests was Fascist Italy. Burritt had only been in the country for a few months when he received orders. "I landed at Port Said in the first week of January 1938 and we were transported to Cairo. When Mussolini decided to move into Abyssinia [now Ethiopia] on 26 September we were rushed up to the Libyan front, to Mersa Matruh and places like that – right up to the wire of the frontier."

Burritt had been extensively training near the Libyan border and knew the area well. "We'd known the desert on the frontier because we'd been practising sending Morse code, which was the quickest way of sending messages in those days, in the back of a 1,500-weight truck. We did all our training in areas that we called the 'Petrified Forest' and the 'Dead City' of Cairo. We were gradually moved further out, and later on we went up as far as El Alamein and based further afield in that area."

While the British were reinforcing Egypt's western frontier, it became clear that there

was a need for an armoured division, and Burritt recalls its creation in late 1938: "All the available troops in the cavalry barracks in Cairo were suddenly ordered to go to the desert to be formed into an armoured division, because the British Army had never had one before us. The general [Major General Percy Hobart] called us the 'Seventh Armoured Division' – why the 'Seventh' I don't know – but that was the beginning of it. The division was split into three brigades. One was the support group that used to come up at night bringing all the rations and supplies. Then there was the Seventh Armoured Brigade and 22nd Armoured Brigade. They were in front of us all the time, and our people on the frontier were the 11th Hussars. They were our 'eyes' if you like throughout the war and were even the first into Berlin, so they kept with us the whole time."

The generals' wireless operator

Burritt found himself working as the personal wireless operator for the commanders of the Seventh Armoured Division when war broke out. "I was given the job as an ordinary signalman and stayed on it until I was made a full sergeant. I was with the first five generals of the division for a long while – four years."



Left: The first Desert Rats badge that was issued to British troops. This fragile item was hand manufactured by nurses in Cairo and was issued to Len Burritt by GOC Major General Michael O'Moore Creagh in February 1940

"UNLIKE MOST WHO SERVED DURING WORLD WAR II BURRITT WAS SENT ON ACTIVE SERVICE BEFORE WAR HAD EVEN BROKEN OUT"

No. 42 Squad of the Royal Corps of Signals after their 'passing out' parade at the regiment's depot at Catterick, January 1937. Burritt (back row, fourth from left) and his fellow signalmen had won a trophy for 'Best Squad'



Burritt pictured in 1936 in uniform. The teenage signalman had just passed out of training

“WE WOULD HAVE BULLETS RICOCHETING OFF OUR ARMoured CARS ALL THE TIME AND HE WOULD GO AND MOVE OUR ARMoured CAR 40-50 TIMES IN A BATTLE SOMETIMES”

Working with generals in North Africa was a highly mobile task, and Burritt was constantly on the move, travelling in an Armoured Command Vehicle (ACV) where he was in charge of communications. “We were at headquarters and I was in charge of the nerve centre, which was called ‘ACV1’. In those days it was a six-wheeled Guy lorry with a 72-foot [22-metre] mast strapped on the side. When you put the mast up it wasn’t mobile at all and took half an hour to do. That soon went when we went back to Cairo to refit, and then I had a second ACV. It used to have a canvas roof and two wireless sets, including one at the back to communicate with the RAF using Westland Lysanders to tell us where tanks were.”

Initially, the communication between the ACVs and the RAF was primitive: “In the beginning the pilot used to have a Morse key strapped to his knee and would send messages back like that, but one day they brought some microphones to us. I spoke to the man in the air at Abukir in Egypt and we did telephony both ways, which was the first time it was ever done. From then on of course the key went, and we kept on using this radiotelephony from ground to air, which was quite easy. I even went up with them in one or two Lysander planes occasionally.”

Burritt eventually worked with the first five commanders of Seventh Armoured Division during World War II, and by being in such close proximity he got to know his high-ranking commanders well. “I worked with them as

friends really, and I got on with them all – you had to. They sat by me, and we used to have a table in our ACV. The general used to sit there, along with the wireless set and myself. Two others would relieve me from my duties, but I was always the general’s personal wireless operator. Whenever he left I would leave too and we’d go in an armoured car, which he would call his ‘charger’. We would go and visit other brigades and divisions during battles.”

Despite the high-level contact, close co-operation with the generals did not necessarily guarantee safety for Burritt. “If they wanted to direct the battle at close quarters they would often get very much too close. We would have bullets ricocheting off our armoured cars all the time, and he would go and move our armoured car 40-50 times in a battle sometimes.”

By working at the heart of this highly mobile division, Burritt became well known and was on cordial terms with the father of Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall. “Everybody knew me, and in our last ACV the passenger and the driver had a partition, so that the officers and us wireless operators could sit in the back with full lights on. The driver and the passenger would be in the dark so that they could drive forward all the time. On this partition we had a map of the battleground. In fact, the Duchess of Cornwall’s father, Major Bruce Shand, used to nip in the back sometimes and say, ‘What’s the position Len?’ He knew me as a boy, and he would see me before he went in to see the ‘Old

A wrecked Fiat CR.42 on an airfield in Libya, 1940. Burritt saw one being shot down by one of his colleagues with a single shot from an anti-tank rifle

BURRITT’S GENERALS

LEN BURRITT PERSONALLY WORKED WITH THE FIRST FIVE COMMANDERS OF THE DESERT RATS DURING WWII



PERCY HOBART

Hobart was the architect and initial trainer of the ‘Mobile Division’ that would subsequently become the Seventh Armoured Division. He subsequently commanded the 11th and 79th Armoured Divisions and was chiefly responsible for the innovative

modified tank designs for D-Day that were famously nicknamed ‘Hobart’s Funnies’.



MICHAEL O’MOORE CREAGH

O’Moore Creagh led the division for the longest duration during WWII and nicknamed them ‘The Desert Rats’ on Burritt’s suggestion. He commanded the division’s first major victory at

Sidi Barrani in 1940, and a daring plan of his led to the surrender of the entire Italian Tenth Army in February 1941.

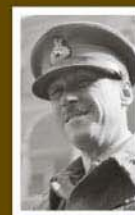
“A DARING PLAN OF HIS LED TO THE SURRENDER OF THE ENTIRE ITALIAN TENTH ARMY”



WILLIAM GOTT

Gott acted as the division’s first wartime GSO (General Staff Officer) before commanding the Support Group and then taking full command. His leadership of the Desert Rats ultimately led to him being appointed to command Eighth Army in August

1942 before his premature death in a plane crash.



JOCK CAMPBELL

Campbell epitomised the bravery of the Desert Rats and won a Victoria Cross at the Battle of Sidi Rezegh while commanding the Support Group of the division. As commander, Campbell created mobile columns to harass the Italians that were known

as ‘Jock Columns.’ However, his tenure as the division’s commander was brief because he was killed three weeks after his appointment, in a car crash.



FRANK MESSERVY

Messervy had previously commanded the Fourth Indian Division and was known as the ‘Bearded Man’ for his habit of not shaving in battle. He was actually captured by the Germans at the Battle of Gazala in May 1942 but managed to escape. Messervy

stripped all of his insignia, persuaded the Germans that he was a bat-man and fled with his fellow staff officers to rejoin the divisional headquarters the following day.

Man' on his conferences – or 'briefings' as they used to call them – before any big battle."

Coining 'The Desert Rats'

Of the five commanders of the Seventh Armoured Division Burritt worked with, the most personally significant were generals Michael O'Moore Creagh and William Gott. Creagh was the division's second commander, and it was through him that Burritt coined the name that the division became universally known as. "I was with the first general when he came out from England to form an armoured division. Then in the first week of February 1940 General O'Moore Creagh came out. He used to sit next to me in my ACV, which at that time was an eight-ton AEC Matador in armoured plating. In the second week a little Arab boy came along with a jerboa in his pocket. It was like a little kangaroo and of course it is a desert rat. It kept coming out and going round his shoulder and diving back into the pocket. General O'Moore Creagh said, 'That's what we should be doing: going in, doing what we have to do and then get out.' He then said, 'We'll call ourselves the Jerboa Division' but I said, 'Well, they are really desert rats.' From that day on the Desert Rats were formed, and I am the world's first Desert Rat."

Burritt's other significant commander was William Gott. Today, Gott is most famous for being appointed as the successor

to Claude Auchinleck as the commander of Eighth Army in August 1942. However, Gott was killed prior to taking up his command when the aircraft he was travelling in was shot down en route to Cairo, and Bernard Montgomery replaced him as commander of Eighth Army.

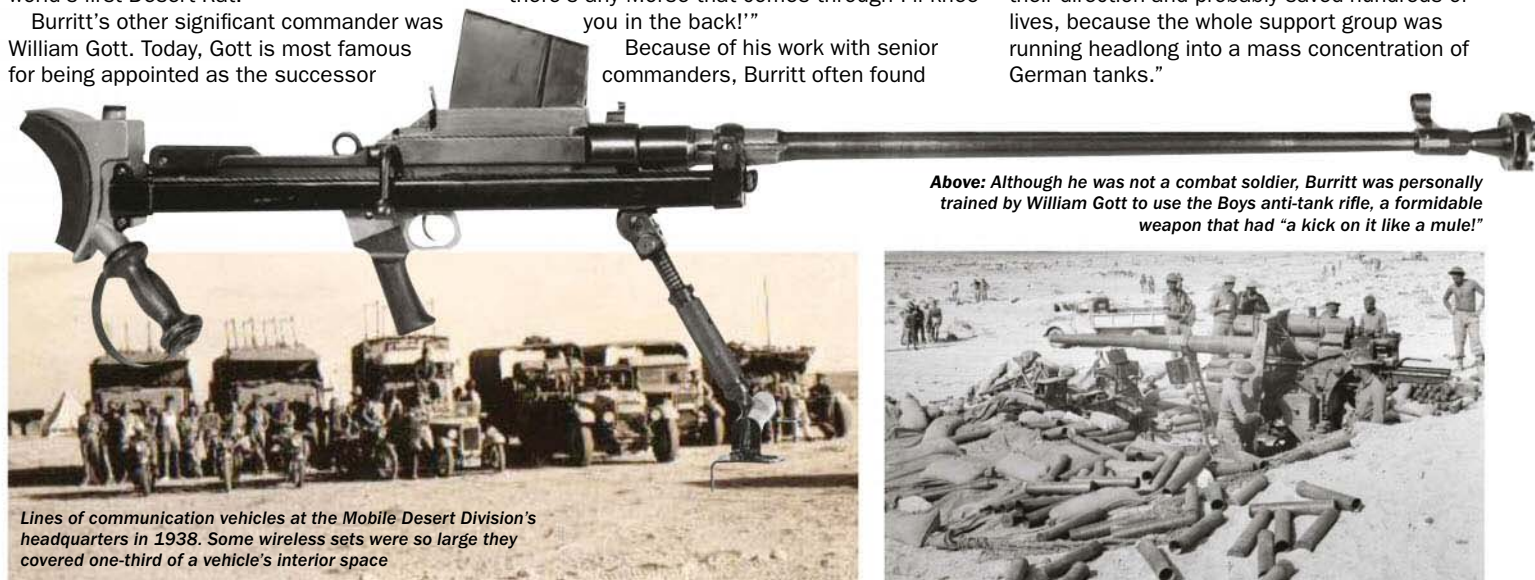
Gott's premature death before he could take command of Eighth Army was an inadvertently significant moment of World War II, but the man himself has been somewhat lost to history. Nevertheless, Burritt knew him long before he became a general and received weapons training from him. "Gott trained me on the Bren gun, but he wasn't a general then, he was a major just about to be made a lieutenant colonel. At the beginning of the war he used to sit next to me, so he was with me at the beginning and the end as far as he was concerned. He trained me not just on the Bren but the Boys anti-tank rifle, which had a thick shoulder pad and a kick on it like a mule!"

Burritt recalls that Gott was a formidable character of great physical strength: "He was like an elephant. He was strong and could go for days without sleep. At the Battle of Sidi Rezegh he kneeed me in the back after the third night when I was feeling tired, saying, 'If there's any Morse that comes through I'll knee you in the back!'"

Because of his work with senior commanders, Burritt often found

himself being responsible for large numbers of men, and on one occasion he saved many lives with his wireless skills. "The area of the desert was so huge that we often used to get cut off. One evening our support group received a report of a concentration of enemy tanks situated at a certain map reference. Our support group, who were coming to bring in all our ammunition and food, were travelling directly into the enemy's sights. General O'Moore Creagh had to get an immediate message sent to the support group and I tried to send it but couldn't hear a sound. There was so much sand in the storm about I couldn't hear it."

To overcome this alarming problem, Burritt proposed an improvised solution to O'Moore Creagh. "I said to him, 'The only way I think you'll do it is by changing it to a lower frequency.' We did this, and I kept calling their sign for a minute before I switched over to 'receive' and they answered me. I sent that message first time but I had to change the emergency frequency to do it. You weren't allowed to do it without the permission of the OC of signals and he couldn't be found in time, so we did it on our own. So we changed frequency, got it through first time, changed their direction and probably saved hundreds of lives, because the whole support group was running headlong into a mass concentration of German tanks."



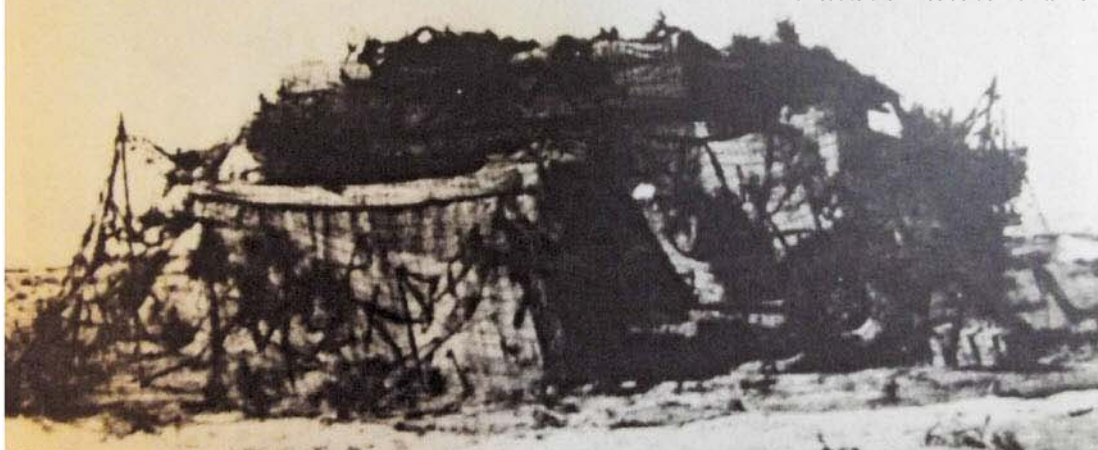
Above: Although he was not a combat soldier, Burritt was personally trained by William Gott to use the Boys anti-tank rifle, a formidable weapon that had "a kick on it like a mule!"

Lines of communication vehicles at the Mobile Desert Division's headquarters in 1938. Some wireless sets were so large they covered one-third of a vehicle's interior space



Signalmen Burritt (right) and Weaver in front of an ACV1 in 1940 during the 'Wavell Push'. The men are wearing the battledress of the day, including pith helmets

Burritt's ACV1 vehicle under camouflage, which was his home for over two years in North Africa before it was destroyed by enemy gunfire on the retreat to El Alamein in 1942. The BBC's first war correspondent, Richard Dimbleby, used to type his reports under one of the vehicle's side tents

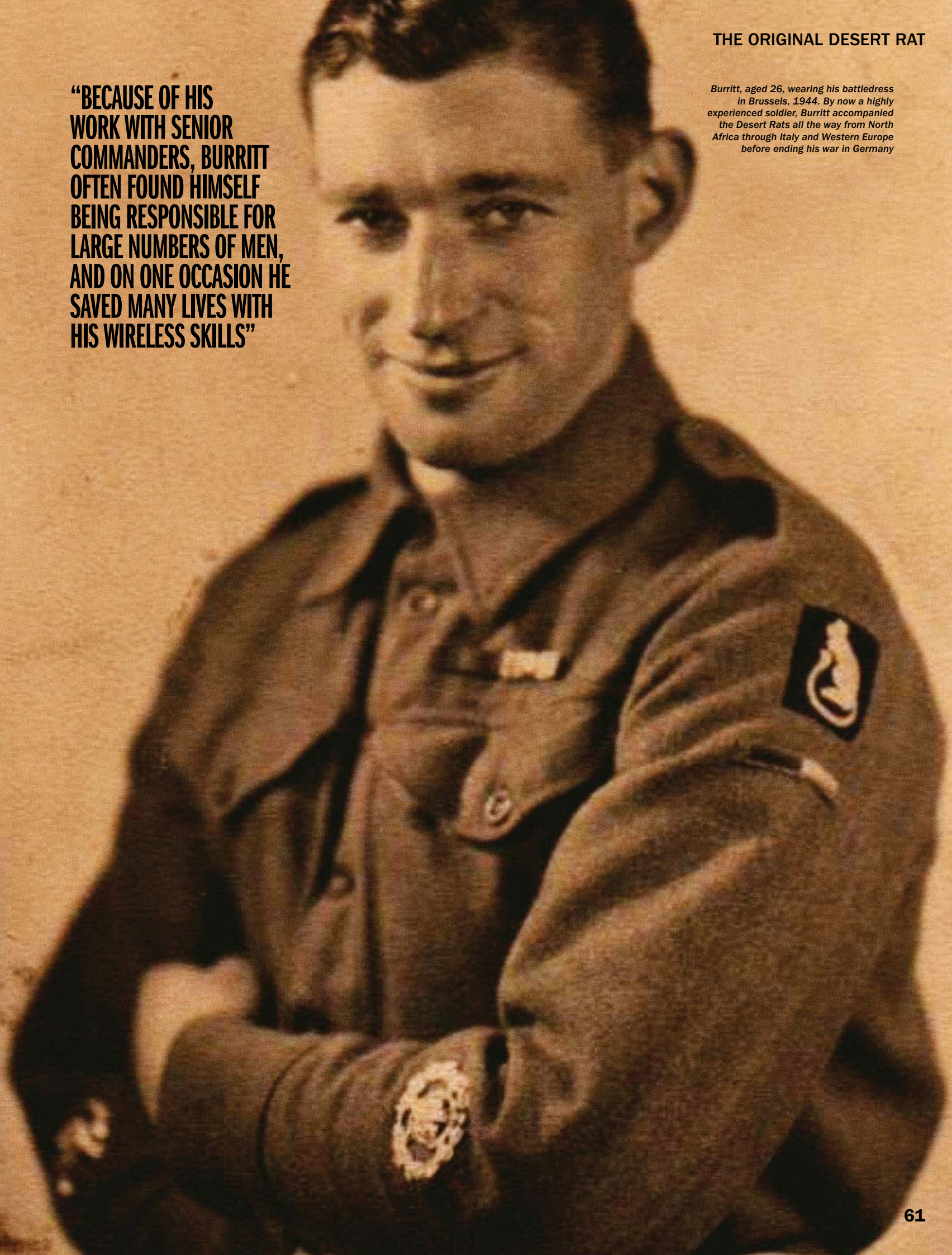


Above: British troops look over an abandoned German 88mm gun west of El Alamein, 7 November 1942. Burritt remembers that these guns were as great a threat to the Allies as German tanks

THE ORIGINAL DESERT RAT

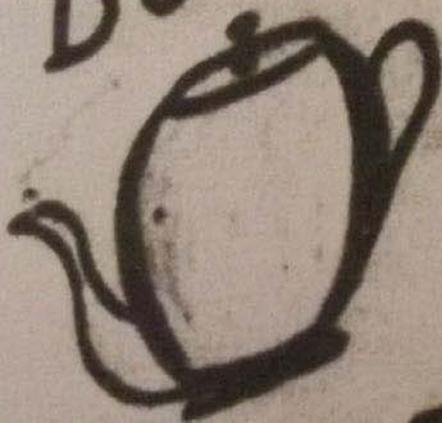
Burritt, aged 26, wearing his battledress in Brussels, 1944. By now a highly experienced soldier, Burritt accompanied the Desert Rats all the way from North Africa through Italy and Western Europe before ending his war in Germany

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“COMPARED TO THE GERMANS THE ITALIANS WERE A LOAD OF RUBBISH. I REMEMBER WHEN WE CAPTURED BENGHAZI THEY HAD TO TURN SOUTH, AND WE CUT THEM OFF AT BEDA FOMM. WE CAPTURED 138,000 OF THEM. THEY DIDN'T WANT TO FIGHT ANYWAY”

WHEN IN
DOUBT:



BREW-UP.

This photograph in the desert, of a passing British lorry, epitomised Allied soldiers' conditions. Water was rationed to four pints a day per man, of which roughly half would make two mugs of tea

Dangers of the desert

The great expanse of the Western Desert was only one of a myriad of problems that Burritt, the senior officers and his fellow soldiers had to endure. Heat was an issue that became immediately obvious when Burritt first arrived in North Africa: "The heat was about 45 degrees but we were all young, and in the beginning for the first three months everyone went around with no shirts on as if they were at the seaside. Then all of a sudden of course everyone started coming out in blotches and so the medics said they wouldn't be responsible for us, and we had to start wearing shirts."

On a daily basis the chief problems were thirst and a lack of personal hygiene that resulted from extremely small rations of water. "I didn't see houses for years and we never washed clothes. I had two shirts, two pairs of trousers and two pairs of shorts. We never washed clothes because we only had four pints of water a day. That's why we were called the 'Gipsy Army'. I was working with GOCs, generals etc., but even the officers were tight on water as well – I've got a picture of a colonel washing his toes in a chipped enamel bowl. The only time you ever had a bath was in the nude in the Mediterranean, and I only did that once at Mersa Matruh for the whole time. However, we weren't aware of the smell; there was no such thing as underarm deodorant in those days."

Burritt recalls that he had to be extremely frugal with his water ration and came up with a novel idea to preserve it: "Your stomach shrinks and the four pints makes up two cups of tea and the rest for a water bottle. The Church of Scotland used to come up and bring canvas bags, which we called 'chatties'. If you happened to save some the day before, we put water in there and hung it under the vehicle as

Below: Burritt worked around the acute lack of water on campaign by using an encased Rolls safety razor for shaving. He ended up using the same blade for five years across North Africa

"I HAD TO HAVE MY EYEBALLS CLEANED AND SCRAPED"

it went along to keep it cool. That was how we kept our drinking water."

Another danger was sandstorms, and early in the war Burritt almost lost his eyesight. "During a sandstorm I got white sand behind the eyeballs, and I was blindfolded for three weeks. I went to the field ambulance and the person who met me was my half-brother! The last time I had seen him was at a training stable for racehorses. He met me there, treated me and bailed me out for three weeks. I had to have my eyeballs cleaned and scraped and they had to take them out somehow! They had to get behind the eye to get this sand out, and for three weeks I was led everywhere – that was horrible. Luckily, my eyes were OK."

Encountering the enemy

For the majority of his war in North Africa Burritt fought Italian forces, and although he worked with the high command he still occasionally encountered enemy troops. One farcical but dramatic incident occurred early during the campaign. "We were raided one day at a place called Buq-Buq, which was on the seashore. This was just after the war had started, and it was like a holiday camp really. The Italians used Fiat CR.42 biplanes to throw bombs at us, and on this particular day the pilot had no bombs left so he threw a mechanic's wrench! I kept that wrench for months."

Immediately after the biplane flew over, Burritt's colleague, Corporal Bob Burgon, took matters into his own hands. "He was a massive chap and strong as a horse, but he was our best despatch rider. To tell you what he was like, he was a sergeant one day and a corporal the next. He immediately fired his anti-tank gun at the biplane that had thrown the wrench and shot it down in one shot!"

Later on in the war, Burritt experienced a rare instance of hand-to-hand fighting: "Fighting for me was just plain Morse code and passing information on to the generals who used to sit next to me – we were never trained to do hand-to-hand fighting. I only did it once later on in the war. I was coming up a narrow track on an escarpment south of Mahdia, and three Italians were building a 'sangar', which was an outpost of stones. They were gathering big bricks and rocks, and as they were working I noticed they had all their rifles propped against a wall. I was in charge of this wireless van coming back to advance headquarters and I thought, 'I've got to go past them.' We went to within ten feet of them, and they never saw us. I thought, 'Well, its either them or us', and as I was in charge I took three of them out. I don't know whether I killed them or not but that was the only hand-to-hand fighting that I did."

Burritt had a low opinion of the Italians' fighting ability: "Compared to the Germans they were a load of rubbish. I remember when we captured Benghazi, they had to turn south, and we cut them off at Beda Fomm. We captured 138,000 of them. They didn't want to fight anyway."

Nevertheless, the introduction of the German Afrika Korps led by Erwin Rommel changed everything, and fighting became much harder for the Desert Rats. Burritt recalls the Battle of Sidi Rezegh in November 1941 as a relentless, prolonged fight: "Sidi Rezegh went on for seven days, and we were Stuka-bombed all day. We kept moving, and I guess we must have moved that car about 40-50 times."



Len Burritt on his wedding day with his wife Connie while on leave, April 1944. Connie also served in the British armed forces in the Auxiliary Territorial Service



Burritt (right) poses at Tripoli in front of a German lorry that he had captured while passing through enemy lines south of Tobruk. His bedraggled appearance is due to wearing the same unwashed clothes for months on end thanks to minimal water supplies

Rommel's aggressive tactics forced the Allies to retreat further into Egypt than at any previous time. German tanks were a significant part of their sudden success, but Burritt believes that their artillery was another factor. "The Germans had Tiger tanks, but they also had this 88mm gun – it was an anti-aircraft gun really. That did more damage and drove us back because the shells burst above ground. You only wanted about a dozen of those firing at you at once and it was like a battalion of the enemy. They really drove us back to El Alamein."

Nevertheless, Burritt felt confident that, although the Allies were retreating deep into Egypt, it was ultimately at Rommel's expense. "I'd been up and down so many times, but this time we kept going. The only thing that we knew when we got to El Alamein was that there was 23 miles between the coast and the Qattara Depression, so that was the obvious place to 'set up stall' again for putting up a fight. The more we went back, the more we got our stores and depots on the way, whereas when Rommel came he was extending his lines of communication. By the time we got to El Alamein we were flat out and exhausted, but he felt it more than us because he didn't have the ammunition, petrol and tanks."

The end of the beginning

The watershed of the Western Desert Campaign came at the Second Battle of El Alamein between 23 October – 11 November 1942 when Eighth Army decisively defeated Rommel's German and Italian forces and ultimately forced them out of Egypt. From this point, Axis forces were constantly on the retreat, and Burritt played no small part in the supporting elements of the victory. "By the time we got to El Alamein I was off the wireless altogether. I was what they called a 'go-getter' or 'trouble-shooter', and I was sent to different places. I had to go to the Chad Valley for instance to bring in the Free French and things like that."

"BURRITT WOULD GO ON TO ACCOMPANY THE DESERT RATS ACROSS EUROPE"

Burritt's biggest assignment at El Alamein was to locate an entire division: "On my 24th birthday, just before Alamein, I was sent down to find the Tenth Indian Division, which was supposed to have been in touch with us for a week but we'd never heard anything on our set. There was no Morse or anything coming through and so they sent me down. I had to skirt the quicksands of the Qattara Depression, go down and try and find the division."

When Burritt finally found the division he noticed that they were highly conspicuous in the desert landscape. "I found their outpost, which was made up of Inniskillings, and they were sitting on a fortified oil barrel drum. I told these men what my job was and they said, 'Well, they (the division) are over there.' I pulled out my field glasses and I could see them because they were sitting down on white sand astride the Alex-Cairo road and using camouflage nets, which were dark brown and dark green. So I could see them as clear as day!"

Once he was among the troops Burritt discovered the reason why he hadn't been able to communicate with them. "When I got down there I had to put them in touch with us. I went onto the set and there was a corporal reading a book and only a metre of aerial up. That was all, and there was nothing coming through on the set. There wouldn't be of course because sand is the worst conductor of all. The sea is the best: whenever we worked with the navy their Morse came booming across."

Victory at Tunis

Following El Alamein, Axis forces were pushed back west across North Africa, and by 1943 American soldiers were advancing eastwards

following Operation Torch. Allied operations now centred on Tunisia, and by 13 May all Axis forces had surrendered or left North Africa. The Western Desert Campaign was finally over.

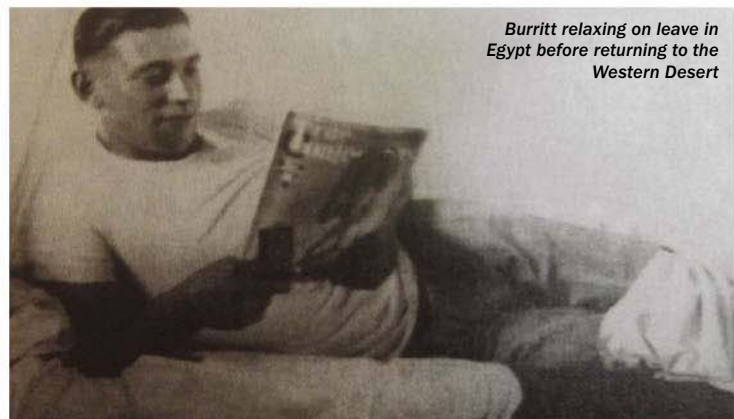
By now Burritt had been in the desert for over five years, and the physical effects of his long service became apparent when he linked up with American troops en route to Tunis. "What we had to do was to take the Mareth Line, which was guarding Tunis. I had to go round as a trouble-shooter and link up with the Americans in the First Army because they had landed on the other side of Tunis. I met an American detachment first at a place called El Krib, and the thing that struck me was that they gave us some food. We found we couldn't eat their 14-man pack: we'd been living on biscuits and God knows what for all those years and their pack did 23 of us. Our stomachs had shrunk so much that it was like having a ten-course meal!"

Entering Tunis itself was a cautious affair but Burritt finally found time to enjoy himself. "When we got to Tunis I spent the first day walking about from roof to roof – we were all looking for Germans who might be hiding. Then one day we all decided to have a swim in the marble bath at Tunis, and then we did a donkey ride to Carthage three miles away. We also saw our first and only ENSA party. In it were big names like Vivien Leigh, Leslie Henson and Beatrice Lillie. Before that we'd never had any entertainment."

Burritt would go on to accompany the Desert Rats across Europe, including at the Salerno Landings and Juno Beach on D-Day, before ending the war as a sergeant major in Germany. He still recognises the important role the division that he named played in keeping the Allied cause fighting in the North African desert. "What had happened was the Germans had kicked us out of France and the Japanese had kicked us out of Singapore. We were the only ones left fighting and of those it was only the Seventh Armoured Division that was fighting in the beginning."



Churchill tanks move through Tunis during its liberation, 8 May 1943. For Burritt, this marked the end of five years of service in North Africa



Burritt relaxing on leave in Egypt before returning to the Western Desert



THE DESERT RATS ASSOCIATION

The Desert Rats Association is dedicated to all who served in the 7th Armoured Division (The Desert Rats), the 4th Armoured Brigade (The Black Rats) and the Seventh Armoured Brigade (Green Jerboas).

The association's patron is HRH Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, and it holds regular events for members. Membership is open to current personnel, ex-servicemen or relatives who either served or are presently serving in the Seventh Armoured Division or Fourth and Seventh Armoured Brigades from 1938 to today.

The association is also in the process of raising funds to move to the Desert Rat's Memorial from the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst to the National Arboretum, Staffordshire.

For all enquires about membership, memorial funding and general information visit: www.desertrats.org.uk/assoc

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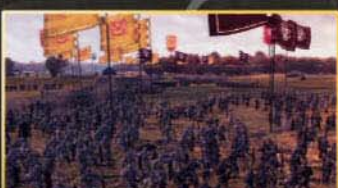
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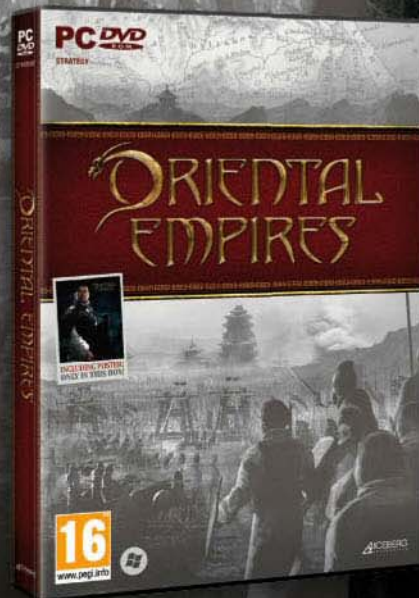
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DEFENDER OF THE FAITH

Alexander Farnese, Third Duke of Parma, was a skilled diplomat and general who rolled back the Calvinist tide during the bloody Dutch rebellion

WORDS WILLIAM E. WELSH

The Spanish lancers bore down on their Dutch counterparts outside Gembloux on 31 January 1578, in the Walloon province of Namur, and scattered them like ashes in the wind. Soon the fabled Spanish tercios, led by Don John of Austria, arrived on the field of battle and charged into the main body of rebels. They killed the majority and sent the survivors fleeing for the safety of the walled town.

32-year-old Alessandro Farnese, the Prince of Parma, had led the impetuous charge of the Spanish cavalry. Don John had warned his dashing cousin not to engage the enemy until the infantry had arrived, but Parma thought the opportunity too great to let slip by. Without his quick thinking the rebels might have escaped that day.

Together, the cousins had annihilated the army of the States General of the Netherlands and shattered the fragile unity the Dutch had achieved through the Union of Brussels. Parma's performance was proof of his aggressive nature and his keen sense of timing. The victory laid the groundwork for re-establishing Spain's control over the southern provinces and forced the beleaguered Dutch to seek foreign military assistance to counter the might of Spain.

The hero of Lepanto arrived in the Spanish Netherlands on 3 November 1576, which coincided almost exactly with the bloody

sacking of Antwerp by mutinying Spanish troops whose pay was overdue. During the course of their rampage, large parts of the town were burned to the ground and thousands slain. The peoples of the Spanish Netherlands largely agreed that they wanted the Spanish troops to leave after a decade of war and strife.

Don John inherited a distasteful situation. He was the third governor-general of the Spanish Netherlands to follow the prince's mother and King Philip II's half sister, Margaret of Parma. She had stepped down from her post as governess-general in 1567, after eight years presiding over the unstable Habsburg dominion.

Don John requested that his cousin join his staff. The Prince of Parma arrived in December of the following year at the head of 9,000 Spanish veterans, who he led from Milan to Brussels via the Spanish Road. Neither Don John nor his two predecessors – Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba, and Don Luis de Requesens y Zuniga – had any qualms about using troops to enforce the king's will on the rebellious inhabitants. Many of them were Calvinists bent on worshipping as they pleased, despite the Spanish king's ban on their religion.

Alba's iron rule had fanned the flames of rebellion, and by the time Don John arrived, Prince William of Orange, the principal leader of the revolt, had unified the provinces against Philip, whom they wanted overthrown and replaced with a more moderate ruler.

When Don John lay dying of typhus in 1578, he implored his cousin to take over his position. With Philip's consent, the 33-year-old general assumed the post at a time when Spain controlled only two of the 17 provinces of the Spanish Netherlands (Luxembourg and Namur). The challenge, which was the greatest he had ever faced, seemed insurmountable to him: "The situation here is such that any reasonable man would refuse to take command, if he could do so honourably," he wrote to his mother.

Courting the Malcontents

Parma's grandfather, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, had suggested to his son Philip in the 1550s that he arrange for the young prince to receive training for an administrative career. But the prince yearned to be a soldier, and Philip granted him permission to join Don John in the campaign that climaxed in the great naval clash in the Gulf of Lepanto in 1571. Afterwards, he served as an assistant to Philip in the Netherlands.

Although the previous governors-general of the Netherlands had won great victories, they came at the expense of driving the moderates and conservatives into the arms of the militant Calvinist rebels. This made Parma's job more difficult. He needed to win more than battles – he needed the hearts and minds of the Catholic Netherlands, who had been alienated by the atrocities committed by the Spanish troops.

ALEXANDER FARNESE

Alexander Farnese, Prince of Parma (and future Duke of Parma) and Governor-General of the Netherlands, is depicted in 1585 at the time of his reconquest of the Netherlands. The 40-year-old seasoned commander wears the goatee that he favoured throughout his life. He holds in his hand a baton that represents his position as King Philip II's viceroy in the Spanish Netherlands. The red sash is the traditional colour for both Spain and the Habsburg Dynasty. The large starched ruff around his neck reflects his wealth and high status. The red and gold colours used in his clothing reflect that he is a member of the Roman Catholic chivalric Order of the Golden Fleece. His rustproof, blackened cuirass with lavish gilding, which is also a display of his high status, offers excellent protection against bladed weapons and can stop a musket ball fired at medium range.



“HE NEEDED TO WIN MORE THAN BATTLES – HE NEEDED THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF THE CATHOLIC NETHERLANDERS, WHO HAD BEEN ALIENATED BY THE ATROCITIES COMMITTED BY THE SPANISH TROOPS”



Parma's failure to get his army aboard the Spanish Armada for the planned invasion of England marred an otherwise spotless record

His short-term objective was to retake the Walloon provinces of Artois and Hainault, held by the rebels, and then move on to Brabant, Flanders and Limburg. He resolved to do this through a combination of military offensives and diplomatic manoeuvres that would restore the allegiance of the Catholic moderates of the south to the Spanish crown. This would in turn weaken the largely Calvinist population of the northern Netherlands.

Parma had an advantage over his predecessors because he had lived for a decade in Brussels as a young man. During that time, the young prince came to know many of the aristocrats from the southern provinces who would later lead rebel forces against the Spanish crown. Parma knew their political mindsets and what motivated them. In his dealings with them in the months and

“PARMA KNEW THEIR POLITICAL MINDSETS AND WHAT MOTIVATED THEM”

years ahead, he had a notion of how they would view and react to events. Also working to his advantage was the time he had spent in the Spanish royal court, where he was able to observe and learn the inner workings of international diplomacy.

The disaffected nobles of the southern provinces, who were known collectively as the Malcontents, vociferously objected to William of Orange's leadership. They also took offence at the rise of Calvinist ruling councils in Brussels, Ghent and other key towns throughout Flanders and Brabant. Parma moved quickly to capitalise on their disaffection. He negotiated an agreement that was signed on 17 May 1579 with prominent leaders in the southern provinces, known as the Treaty of Arras. In this treaty, the Walloon provinces acknowledged the authority of Philip II and Parma and embraced Catholicism as their only religion. In return, the Walloon nobles could expect the reinstatement of their hereditary privileges.

The agreement also called for significant concessions on the part of Parma – he agreed to send the hated tercios back to Spanish Lombardy. He did this knowing full well that it

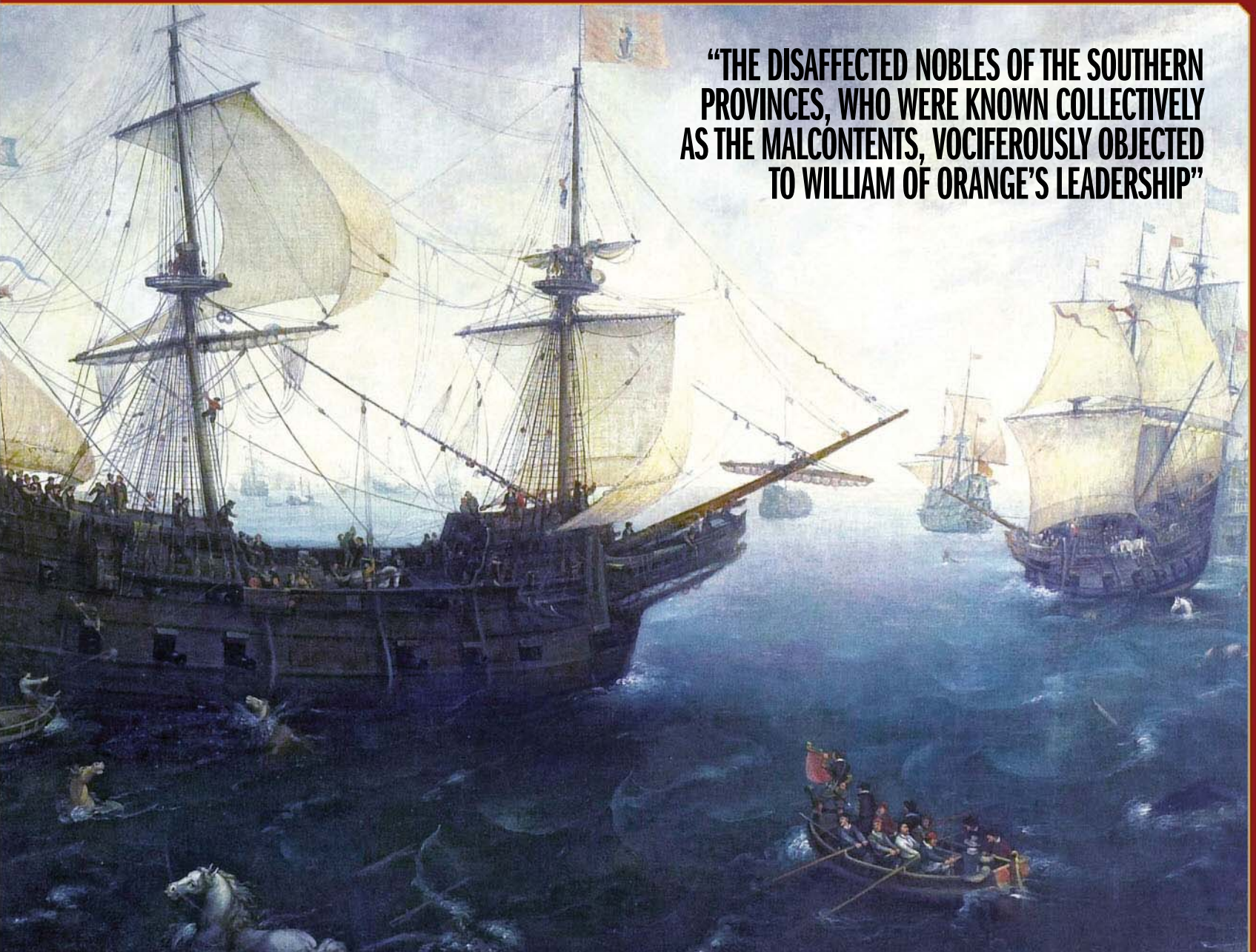
would leave him in command of inferior Walloon or German troops. Parma hatched deals with individuals and groups wherever possible to avoid bloodshed. To ensure the loyalty of some of the Malcontents, Parma arranged for them to receive payment in gold from the Spanish purse. When Floris de Montmorency, Baron of Montigny, complained loudly that he was passed over unfairly, Parma had to pay him, as well as others, from his own purse because of a shortage of crown funds.

Carrot-and-stick diplomacy

After securing the loyalty of the Walloon provinces through the Treaty of Arras, Parma began his military offensive to regain control of the strongholds held by rebel forces. In many cases he was able to negotiate the capture of cities without having to shed blood, by purchasing their loyalty and submission. For example, he gained control of the Flemish town of Mechelen in July 1579 by paying 5,000 florins to its Walloon governor, Baron de Bours.

As governor-general, Parma had the authority to grant royal pardons on behalf of King Philip to Catholic nobles who wished to return to

“THE DISAFFECTED NOBLES OF THE SOUTHERN PROVINCES, WHO WERE KNOWN COLLECTIVELY AS THE MALCONTENTS, VOCIFEROUSLY OBJECTED TO WILLIAM OF ORANGE’S LEADERSHIP”



FLAIR FOR ENGINEERING

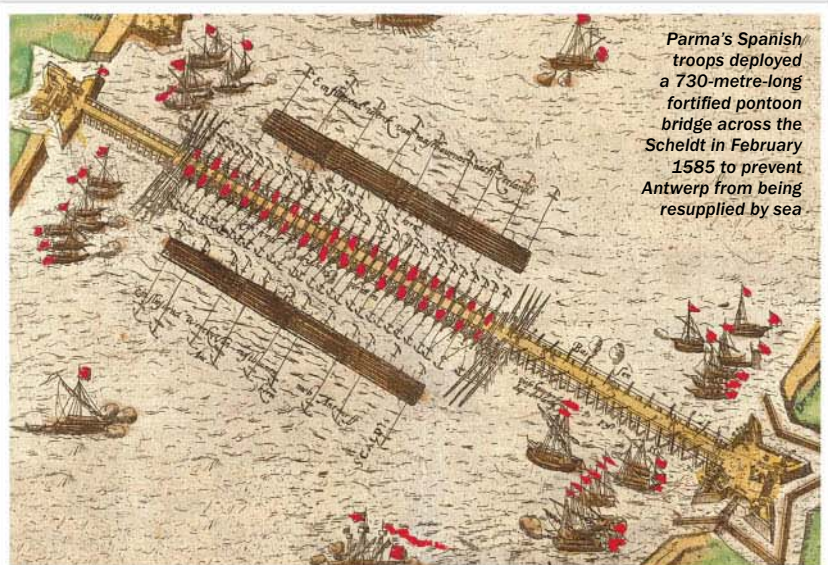
THE PRINCE OF PARMA STRANGLER ANTWERP IN 1585 BY BUILDING A BRIDGE OF BOATS ACROSS THE SCHELDT RIVER TO PREVENT RESUPPLY BY SEA

Rather than risk an assault on the strong walls of Antwerp from the landward side, the Prince of Parma drew up plans for a bridge barrier that would choke the city by blocking the Scheldt Estuary. This would prevent the Dutch and English ships from supplying the army of the States General of the Netherlands.

Two Italian engineers oversaw the seven-month project, which was completed in February 1585. The 730-metre-long bridge barricade consisted of 32 craft lashed together with four lengths of chain and anchored to the bottom and sides of the river.

The Spanish manned the bridge of boats in the event of an attack, with 30 men in each boat. 200 guns, placed at intervals along the bridge, furnished sufficient firepower to repel an attack.

On 5 April 1585, the rebels sent four incendiary barges into the bridge. Only one of the four barges ignited properly, but the explosion killed 800 Spanish troops and created a breach in the barrier. Parma quickly put his men to work repairing the breach. Although it was only a temporary patch, the repair job fooled the rebels into believing it was sturdy enough to withstand a follow-up assault.



Parma's Spanish troops deployed a 730-metre-long fortified pontoon bridge across the Scheldt in February 1585 to prevent Antwerp from being resupplied by sea.

“PARMA TOOK PAINS TO ENSURE THAT THE KIND OF WHOLESAL MASSACRES THAT HAD OCCURRED UNDER THE DUKE OF ALBA DID NOT HAPPEN ON HIS WATCH”



RESCUE MISSION IN FRANCE

BESIEGED BY PROTESTANT KING HENRY IV IN 1590, THE CATHOLICS OF PARIS LOOKED TO PARMA TO SAVE THEM FROM STARVATION

Fresh from his victory at Ivry in March 1590, the protestant French King Henry IV besieged Paris two months later. The plight of the predominantly Catholic population of Paris prompted Philip II to dispatch the Duke of Parma to break the siege.

Parma joined forces with the Duke of Mayenne's Catholic League army in late August at Meaux. Both sides were evenly matched with 26,000 troops. After three months under siege, Parisians were dying by the thousands from starvation. Parma's objective was to open a supply corridor to the city to alleviate the suffering.

Parma resolved that any open-field battles would be on his terms. Henry IV scraped together half of his army on the western outskirts of Paris and sent Parma an invitation to battle. But the Spanish general declined the offer: “[I have not] come so far to be directed by an enemy,” replied Parma.

Parma feinted towards Henry's army on 5 September, then countermarched to Lagny on the Marne River, a tributary that joined the Seine in Paris. The Spanish stormed the fortress of Lagny two days later. They loaded boats with food and sent them downstream to the city. Two days after that, King Henry withdrew.

Parma proved that he could obtain a difficult objective simply by outmanoeuvring his foe and without having to fight unnecessary battles.

Right: A Catholic League procession in besieged Paris, meant to display solidarity, included heavily armed monks and friars



the service of Spain and regain their titles, lands and privileges. This was the case for Philippe de Croy, the Duke of Aarschot and the Stadholder of Flanders, who had previously supported attempts by Archduke Matthias of Austria to rule the Netherlands.

But when a town refused to surrender, Parma dealt with it harshly to make an example of it to other rebel-controlled towns. After a four-month siege of Maastricht in Limburg, Parma allowed his troops to sack the city following its capture on 29 June 1579. Even so, Parma took pains to ensure that the kind of wholesale massacres that had occurred under the Duke of Alba did not happen on his watch, as he could ill afford to further alienate the Netherlanders.

Parma endured challenges on both the political and military fronts in the early 1580s. In keeping with the Treaty of Arras, the Spanish troops departed for Lombardy in April 1580. When the Walloon leaders demanded that Philip also remove Parma from the Netherlands, Philip sought a compromise, by which Margaret of Parma returned to the Low Countries to serve a second term as governess-general. Under that arrangement, Parma would serve as captain-general of the military forces.

As a result of Philip's interference, Parma found himself in an untenable situation. Parma refused to co-operate with his mother on the grounds that he could not function effectively in the reduced capacity. He believed that one official should control both Spanish policy and military forces in the Netherlands. The problem was resolved when Philip allowed Margaret to retire from service in 1582.

The Prince of Parma faced another challenge when William of Orange and other rebel leaders recruited Duke Francis of Anjou, the brother

Left: The Prince of Parma helped his cousin Don John of Austria win a decisive victory over the rebels at Gembloux in January 1578

“THE RECONQUEST WAS SLOW AND TEDIOUS WORK THAT REQUIRED STARVING OR WEAKENING A TOWN THAT REFUSED TO SUBMIT, TO THE POINT THAT IT COULD BE TAKEN BY STORM OR SUBTERFUGE”

of the French king, Henry III, as their new sovereign in January 1582. Orange saw this as a way to gain French military assistance for the beleaguered Dutch army. Francis was driven out of the Netherlands the following year when he tried to take Antwerp by force and install a French garrison. Because William of Orange had attempted to usurp Philip's authority by replacing him, Philip placed a bounty of 25,000 crowns on William of Orange's head.

Parma had only been able to make modest gains against the rebels in the first few years of his regency because of a shortage of funds to finance the war effort and the departure of the Spanish troops. The situation changed when the Catholics of the southern provinces realised that they needed Spanish units billeted in the Netherlands to protect their lives and property. For this reason, in February 1582 they implored Parma to bring back the Spanish troops. When they returned, Parma had a powerful army of 60,000 Spanish, German and Walloon troops.

Parma's counteroffensive continued in 1583 with the reconquest of West Flanders and its strategic seaports. He then turned inland to focus on retaking rebel-held towns in East Flanders and Brabant. In previous campaigns, the Spanish had made substantial conquests in some of the provinces in the north, such as Drenthe, Gelderland, Groningen, and Overijssel. Wherever possible, he offered townspeople clemency if they would pledge their allegiance to the Spanish crown. If the inhabitants or the ruling body of a town refused to submit to Parma's army, he besieged it. The reconquest

was slow and tedious work that required starving or weakening a town that refused to submit to the point that it could be taken by storm or subterfuge. By the end of 1584, Parma had reconquered nearly all of Flanders and Brabant. At that point, he fixed his sights on Antwerp, the jewel of the Netherlands.

English intervention

The rebel opposition suffered serious leadership setbacks in 1584. In that year, Duke Francis of Anjou died on 10 June, and William of Orange was killed by an assassin exactly one month later. Taking advantage of the rebels' lack of a strong, charismatic leader, Parma pressed forward with his campaign to secure the last remaining rebel-held towns south of the Rhine and Maas rivers.

In July 1584, Parma began siege operations against the great trade and financial centre of Antwerp. To thwart the Spanish, city officials ordered the sea-dikes opened to flood the surrounding area. But this did not stop the intrepid Parma, who simply ordered his men to build small forts atop the dikes. After 13 months, the town surrendered.

The protestant Queen Elizabeth I of England, who had long refrained from openly supporting the Dutch for fear of provoking war with Spain, finally came to their aid. Through an alliance forged in August 1585, she sent Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, to the Netherlands at the head of 6,000 troops.

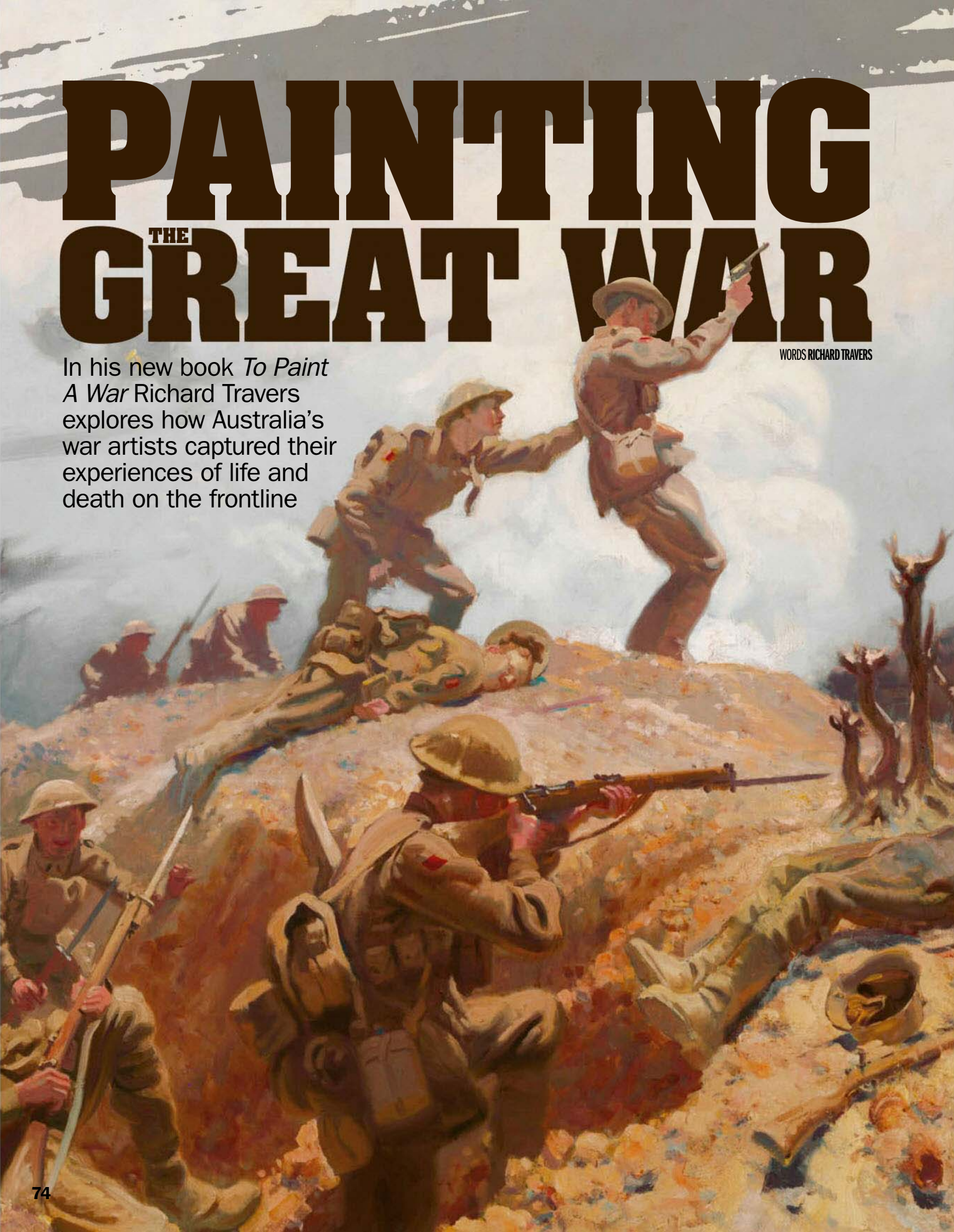
“AFTER THREE MONTHS UNDER SIEGE, PARISIANS WERE DYING BY THE THOUSANDS FROM STARVATION”

Right: An engraving of the Duke of Parma. Parma's military and diplomatic skills helped Spain retain control of the southern provinces in the Netherlands until 1714

PAINTING THE GREAT WAR

WORDS RICHARD TRAVERS

In his new book *To Paint A War* Richard Travers explores how Australia's war artists captured their experiences of life and death on the frontline



For centuries art has captured the chaos and tragedy of warfare, and this is no less true of the horrors experienced during WWI. Lord Kitchener's first instinct was to censor, which is why there are so few contemporary images of the Gallipoli campaign. But things changed in 1916 when the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia established official war art schemes to create a painted record of the Great War.

Will Dyson was the first Australian official war artist. He was sent to the Somme Valley with a brief to make sketches of the 'digger' [soldier] at war. His first sketches were of men in the Somme. Here, Richard Travers takes us through a selection of stunning images from his new book, *To Paint A War*.

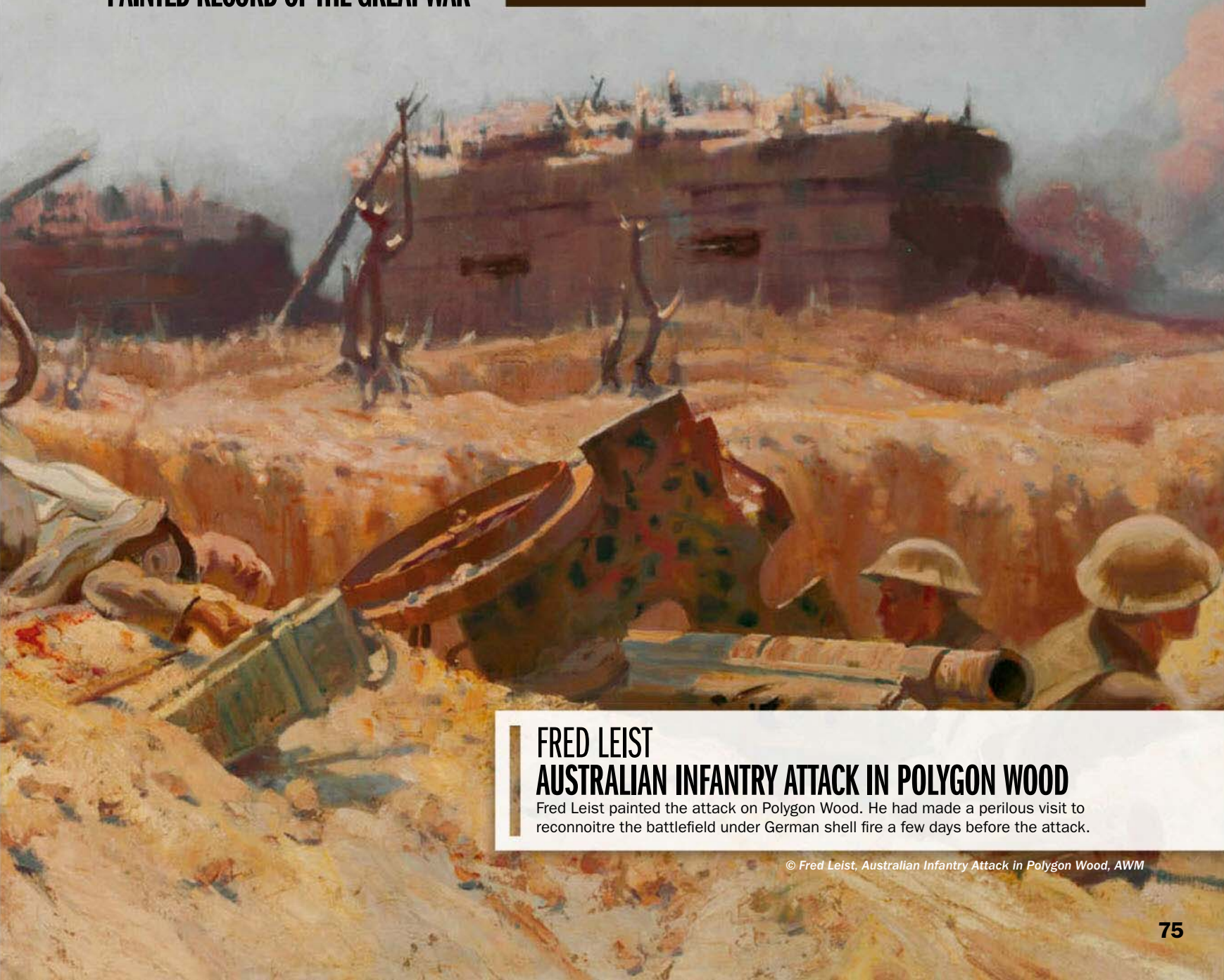
“THINGS CHANGED IN 1916 WHEN THE UNITED KINGDOM, CANADA AND AUSTRALIA ESTABLISHED OFFICIAL WAR ART SCHEMES TO CREATE A PAINTED RECORD OF THE GREAT WAR”

WILL DYSON COMING OUT ON THE SOMME

Dyson vowed that, “I will never draw a line to show war except as the filthy business it is,” so he drew men obviously affected by their ordeal. To their credit, the founders of the Australian scheme made no attempt to influence how he drew the war. That tradition continues today – Australian war artists are free to paint war exactly as they see it.



© Will Dyson, Coming out on the Somme, AWM



FRED LEIST AUSTRALIAN INFANTRY ATTACK IN POLYGON WOOD

Fred Leist painted the attack on Polygon Wood. He had made a perilous visit to reconnoitre the battlefield under German shell fire a few days before the attack.

© Fred Leist, Australian Infantry Attack in Polygon Wood, AWM

© Arthur Streeton, The Somme Valley near Corbie, AWM

**“THE SOMME VALLEY REMINDED THE DIGGERS OF
THE FINEST AUSTRALIAN WHEAT COUNTRY”**

ARTHUR STREETON THE SOMME VALLEY NEAR CORBIE

The Somme Valley reminded the ‘diggers’ of the finest Australian wheat country. Arthur Streeton, famous as a painter of the Australian bush, captured the similarity. Streeton’s painting shows the Somme in the foreground, Corbie in the centre and Villers Bretonneux in the right mid-ground, with shellfire from the attack of 8 August 1918 on the far horizon.

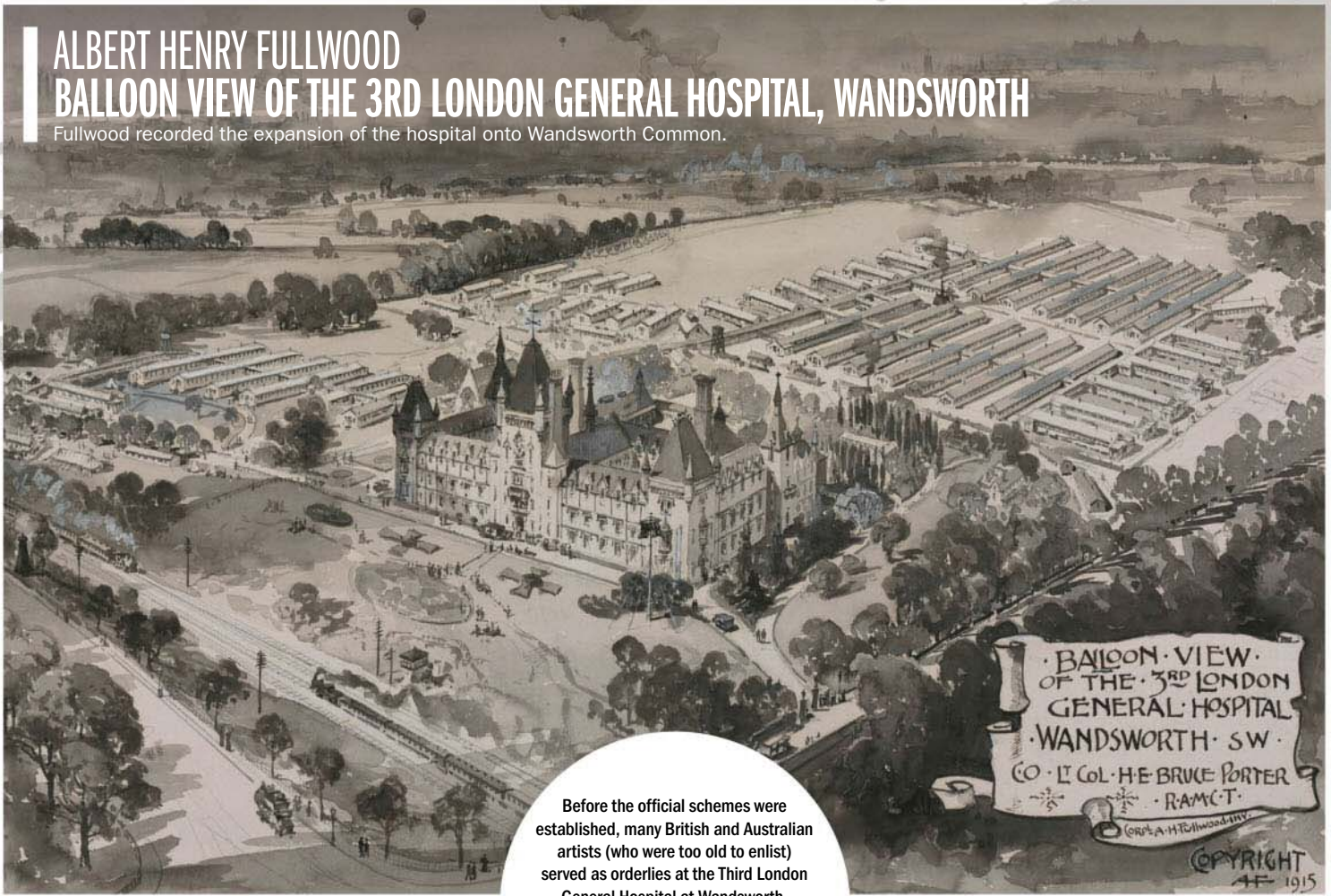
GEORGE COATES FIRST AUSTRALIAN WOUNDED TO ARRIVE IN ENGLAND FROM GALLIPOLI

George Coates painted the scene inside the hospital as a digger wounded at Gallipoli was admitted for treatment.

© George Coates, First Australian Wounded to Arrive in England from Gallipoli, AWM

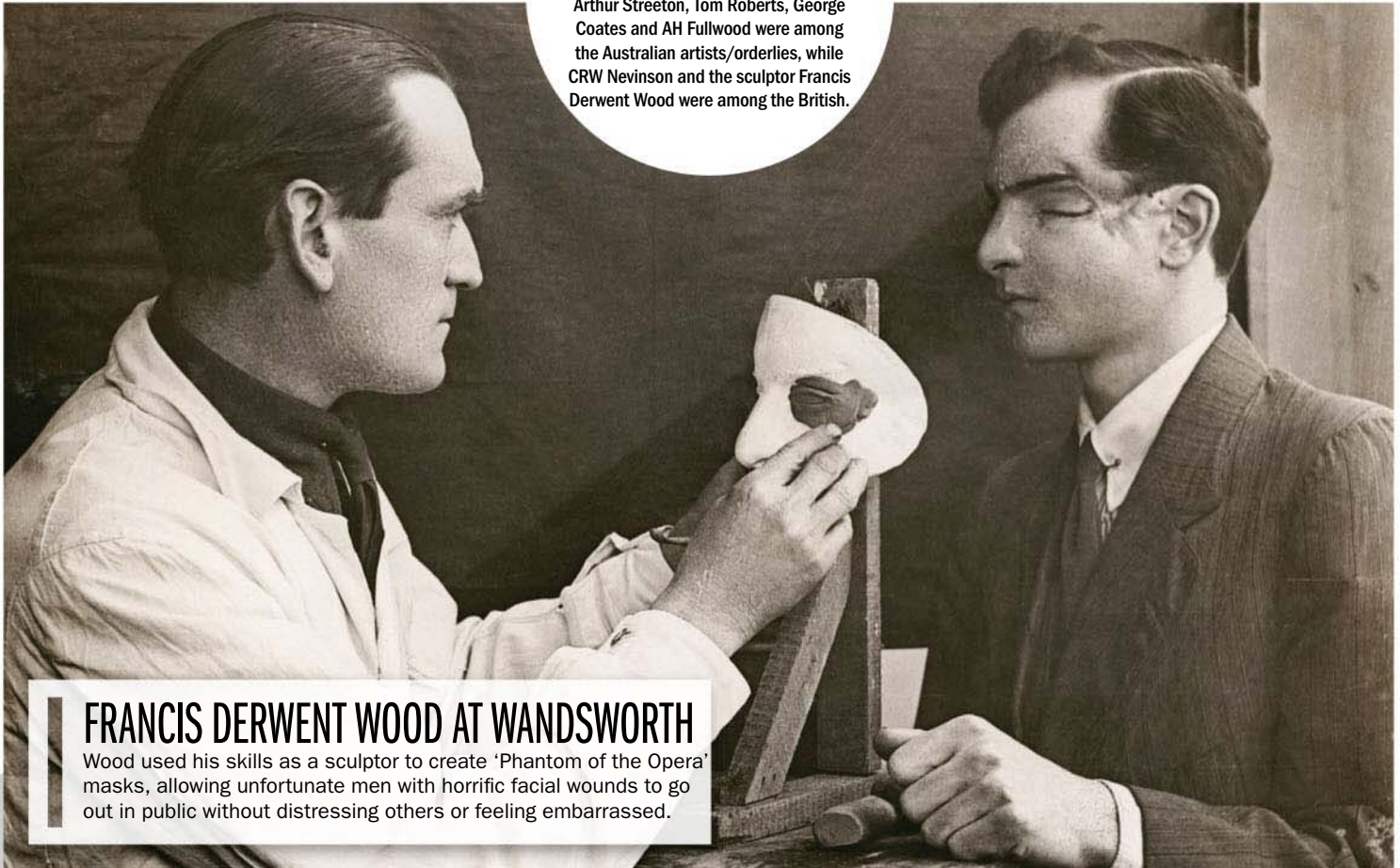
ALBERT HENRY FULLWOOD BALLOON VIEW OF THE 3RD LONDON GENERAL HOSPITAL, WANDSWORTH

Fullwood recorded the expansion of the hospital onto Wandsworth Common.



BALLOON VIEW OF THE 3RD LONDON GENERAL HOSPITAL WANDSWORTH S.W.
CO. LT COL. H.E. BRUCE PORTER RAMC.T.
© CRW A.H. FULLWOOD 1915

Before the official schemes were established, many British and Australian artists (who were too old to enlist) served as orderlies at the Third London General Hospital at Wandsworth. Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, George Coates and AH Fullwood were among the Australian artists/orderlies, while CRW Nevinson and the sculptor Francis Derwent Wood were among the British.



FRANCIS DERWENT WOOD AT WANDSWORTH

Wood used his skills as a sculptor to create 'Phantom of the Opera' masks, allowing unfortunate men with horrific facial wounds to go out in public without distressing others or feeling embarrassed.

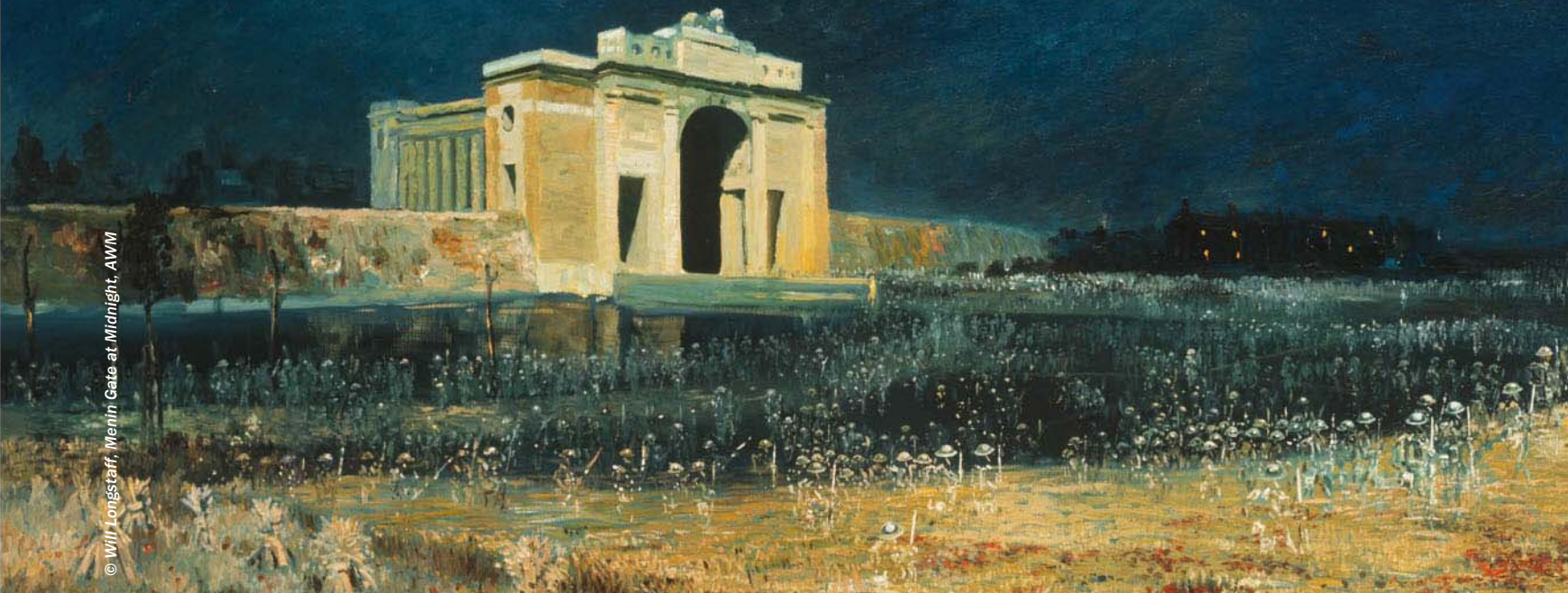
© Henry Fullwood, Balloon View of the 3rd London General Hospital, Wandsworth, AWM

© Derwent Wood at Wandsworth, AWM

WILL LONGSTAFF MENIN GATE AT MIDNIGHT

Another artist from the ranks, Will Longstaff made an image representing the slaughter on the Western Front. It remains one of the most popular paintings in the collection of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. The Menin Gate commemorates the men who died at Passchendaele who have no known grave. Longstaff's painting shows them as a haunting and mystical presence in the fields outside Ypres.

© Will Longstaff, Menin Gate at Midnight, AWM



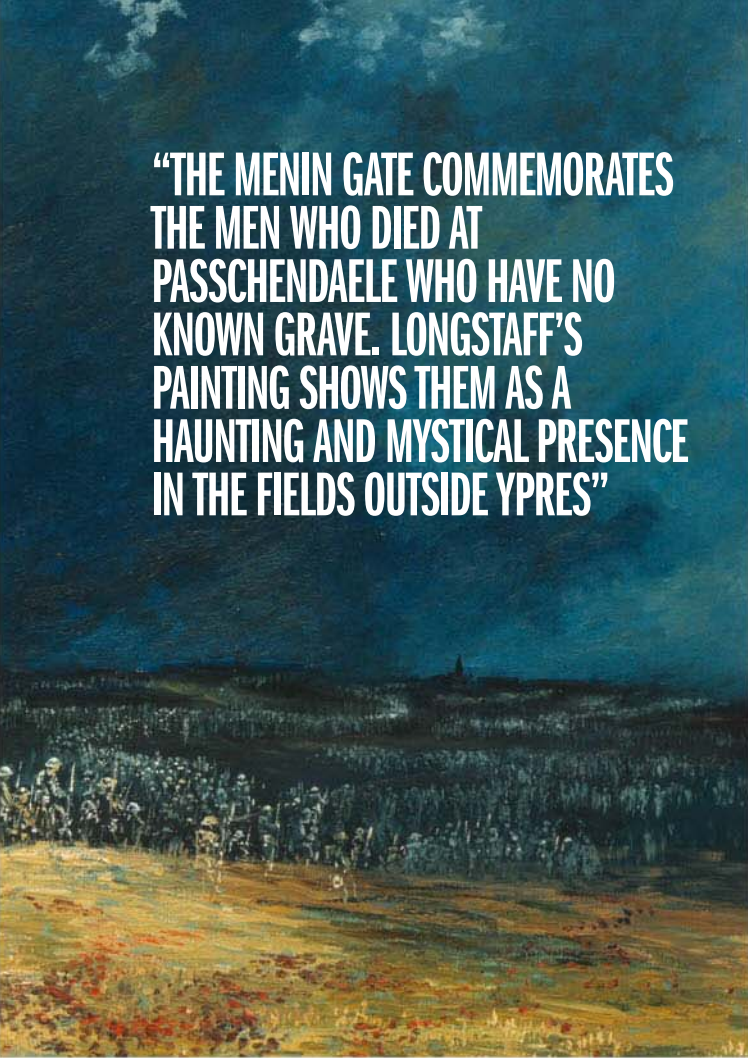
SEPTIMUS POWER BRINGING UP THE AMMUNITION, FLANDERS, AUTUMN 1917

Professional artists recruited to the official scheme were sent to France to make sketches, which the government might then commission as major works to be painted in the studio. Septimus Power, a painter of horses, made wonderful images of horses bringing ammunition to the front near Passchendaele.

© Septimus Power, Bringing up the Ammunition, Flanders, Autumn 1917, AWM



“THE MENIN GATE COMMEMORATES THE MEN WHO DIED AT PASSCHENDAELE WHO HAVE NO KNOWN GRAVE. LONGSTAFF’S PAINTING SHOWS THEM AS A HAUNTING AND MYSTICAL PRESENCE IN THE FIELDS OUTSIDE YPRES”



© Hilda Rix Nicholas, *A Man*, AWM

HILDA RIX NICHOLAS A MAN

Hilda Rix Nicholas was never invited to join an official scheme. Although the war dealt her a series of crushing personal blows, including the tragic death of her young husband, she emerged from the conflict to make one of the finest paintings of the Great War. Her portrait, *A Man*, captures the essence of the digger, and the hope, still current when she made the portrait, that the Great War really was the war to end all wars.

FRANK CROZIER THE BEACH AT ANZAC

In 1918 the Australian army established a second war art scheme for artists in the Australian Imperial Force. One of the artists in this scheme was asked to create an ex post facto record of the Dardanelles campaign. Frank Crozier, who had served on the peninsula, made a quintessentially Australian record of Anzac, painting it as a day at the beach.



© Frank Crozier, *The Beach at Anzac*, AWM



TO PAINT A WAR

Exploring the lives of the Australians who painted the Great War. From Thames and Hudson. Available for £24.95



WORDS BY TOM GARNER

THE SIEGE OF

JADOTVILLE



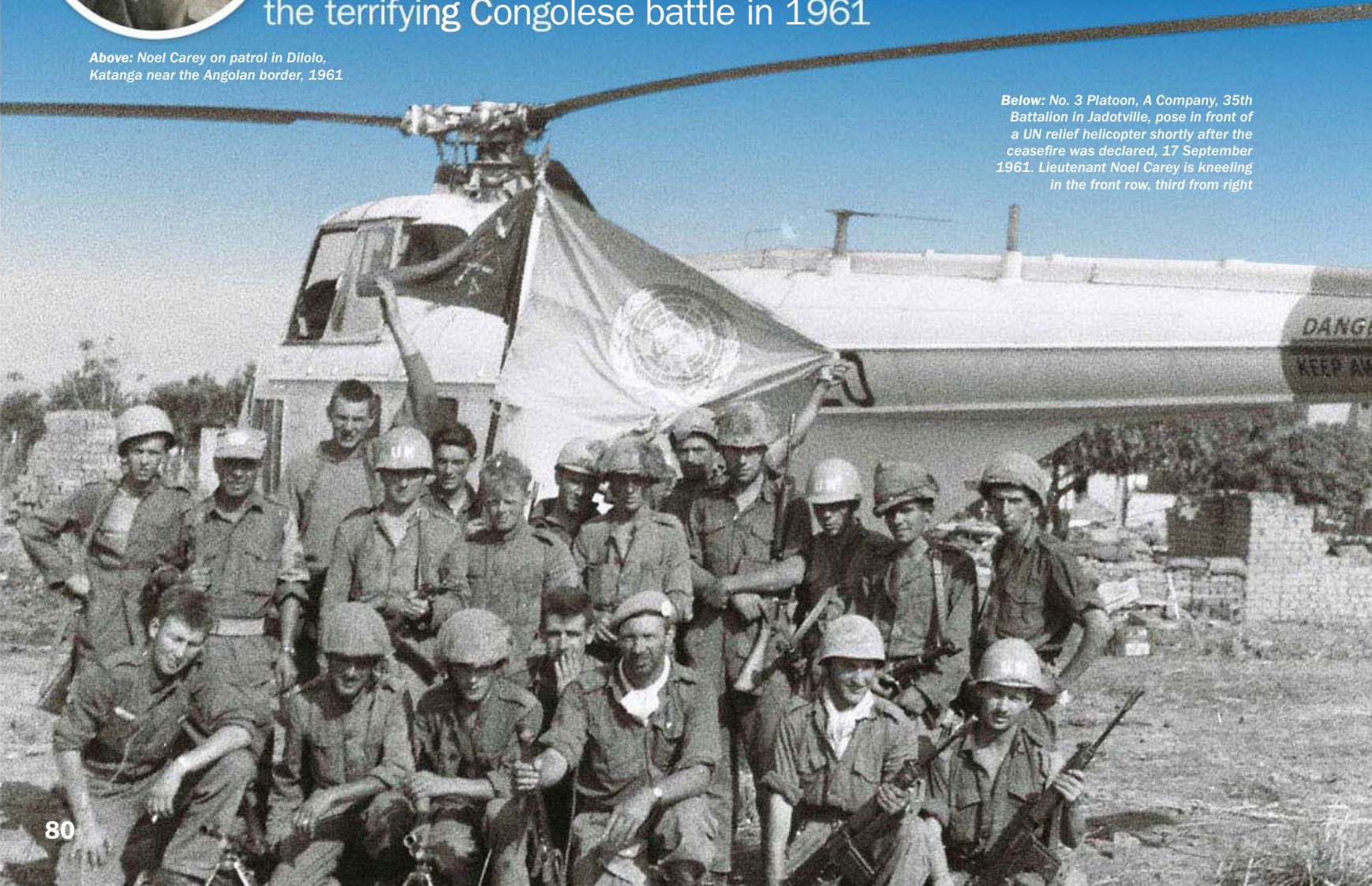
PART II: AN OFFICER UNDER FIRE

In the second of three interviews with surviving Irish UN veterans, Noel Carey recalls serving as a lieutenant during the terrifying Congolese battle in 1961



Above: Noel Carey on patrol in Dilolo, Katanga near the Angolan border, 1961

Below: No. 3 Platoon, A Company, 35th Battalion in Jadotville, pose in front of a UN relief helicopter shortly after the ceasefire was declared, 17 September 1961. Lieutenant Noel Carey is kneeling in the front row, third from right



In September 1961, 156 members of A Company, 35th Irish Infantry Battalion were serving in the Congo as part of a UN mission to keep the peace in a country that was descending into civil war. But instead of just keeping the peace, the Irish soldiers found themselves fighting for their lives in secessionist Katanga. Between 13-17 September 1961 these inexperienced and underequipped troops put up a heroic defence in the mining town of Jadotville against 2,000-4,000 Katangese-armed gendarmeries and battle-hardened mercenaries.

Thanks to the brilliant leadership of Commandant Patrick 'Pat' Quinlan, A Company's attackers suffered 300-400 killed and around 1,000 wounded. In contrast the Irish remarkably suffered no fatalities and only five wounded. Despite this, they were inadequately supported by the UN high command and were forced to surrender. After a gruelling captivity they returned home to a cold reception from the Irish Army, and the veterans' bravery went unrecognised for over 40 years. However, since the early 2000s the siege has become acknowledged as one of the most wrongfully forgotten battles in Irish and UN military history, and surviving veterans have belatedly been honoured.

Ten Irish Army officers served at Jadotville. The youngest, Lieutenant Noel Carey, was only 25 years old, but he led 30 men in No. 3 Platoon during the siege. His courage was noticed by Pat Quinlan, who later described Carey as "a fearless officer with the qualities of leadership which are demanded in desperate situations such as this." Quinlan officially recommended Carey for a merit award but the Irish Army medals board refused to grant any decorations to individually nominated veterans – a situation that still exists today.

Now aged 81, Carey recalls his experiences commanding men during this remarkable event in the Cold War.

Deployment to the Congo

When were you commissioned as an officer in the Irish Army?

I joined in 1954 as a cadet and was commissioned in 1956. I would have known most of the NCOs and quite a sizeable number of the troops who were with us in Jadotville because I'd been privileged to train some of them as recruits. We had no overseas service so when the call came in 1960 for the first battalion to go overseas it was a huge uplift. Well over 95 per cent of those in the army volunteered.

What was your knowledge of the Congo before you were deployed?

Our knowledge was nil. We didn't even have a map, so we were laying out school atlases. The people who briefed us said that we would see lions and elephants. We never did and we were also told that it would be peaceful and it certainly wasn't!

There was an idealistic thing that we were going out to give 'emancipation' to the black population. That was very strong, and it was taught into us by religious people in school, which in my case was the Christian Brothers. It was definitely idealism that drove us all and of course the whole idea of adventure.

How were the Irish troops received by the local Katangese population?

We never had any difficulties from the local population whatsoever – in fact we were welcomed. But we did gradually start to realise that there were other things at play – the mercenaries. They were quite conspicuous around the area of Elisabethville, which was the capital of Katanga. It was gradually obvious that they were pulling the strings.

What was the background to A Company's involvement at the Siege of Jadotville?

Pat Quinlan came to us and said, "Pack up immediately, we're going to a place called Jadotville." Of course we all ask, "Why are we going there?" He said, "The white population are fearful and they want the UN in there to guard them in case there are riots."

We drove into Jadotville, which was about 90 miles away, and Quinlan had the foresight to dig in because he wasn't happy with what was happening. He was told by the *bürgermeister* to get out of Jadotville. He said, "We do not want you here." So here we were, lured into this place and directed in by who knows. Quinlan contacted the battalion and said, "Look, we're not wanted here, there is no rioting. Should I withdraw?" He was told to stay where he was.

Quinlan gave me instructions to go into Jadotville itself and I drove down in a Land Rover. The railway gates were blocked and I remember getting out and I could see a company of fully armed Katangese troops. I asked to see one of the officers, who was probably Belgian and said, "We have freedom of movement." He replied, "No, you're not going in there. My instructions are that no one is to pass the gate." I reported to Quinlan and within three days we were actually being attacked.

A dangerous engagement

How did the siege begin on 13 September?

I had been up all night on the 12th. I was the duty officer and we'd heard a lot of rumours. Some of the native lads who were working for us said that there was every possibility of being attacked, which was pretty harrowing. We put a number of people in the trenches but not all of them.

At 7am I got a message from headquarters that Operation Morthor had taken place in Elisabethville and that all was well. I was also told to inform Quinlan and be on the alert, so I immediately did. We were not aware that two of our lads were killed in Elisabethville as well as quite a few wounded.

There was no question there was trouble. I relayed a message to Quinlan, who told me to go and elect the two forward platoons that were nearest to the town. The only vehicle I could get was the ambulance. As I was about to turn left through a crowd I could see a truck parked across the road: that was the first sight we had of Katangese troops. They were fully armed and were dismounting. As I turned to the platoon who were going to Mass the first shots rang out.

Right: Noel Carey's commanding officer, Commandant Pat Quinlan. Carey recalls that Quinlan could often be a difficult man but was also a brilliant leader

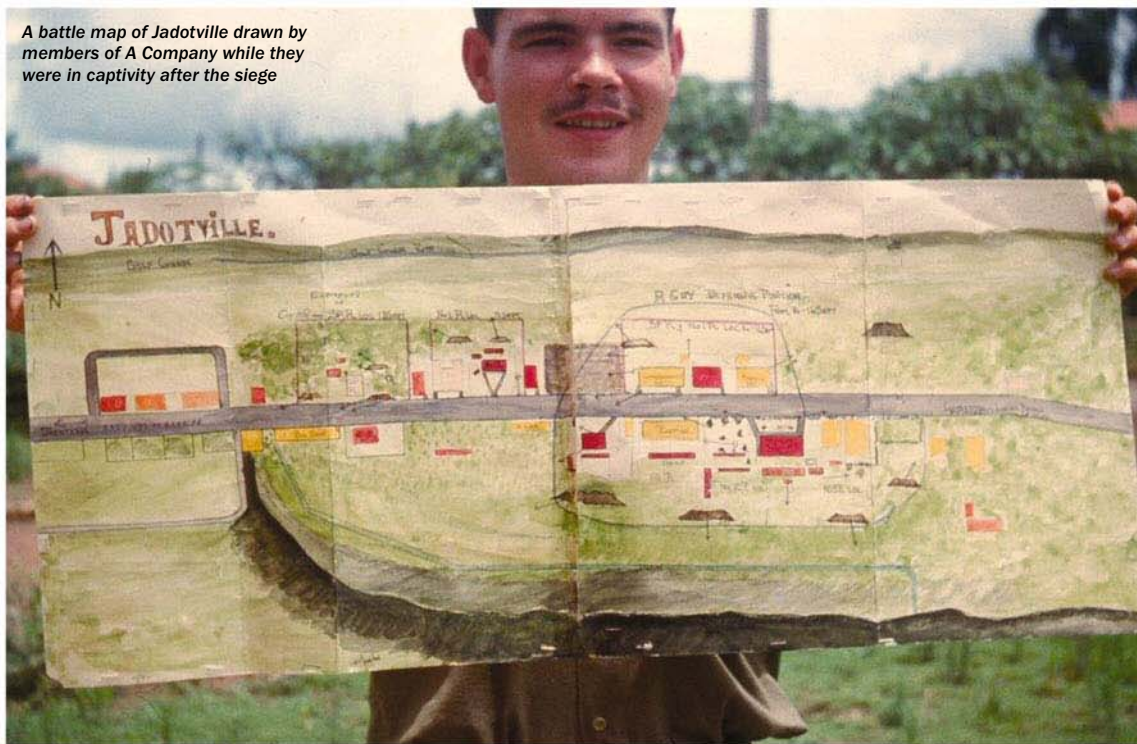
I honked the horn at the crowd going to Mass, who then dispersed, and I moved back down to headquarters. Things quietened down for a while, when all of a sudden Quinlan gave me instructions to set up a roadblock near our own area. As I was setting up the roadblock the first 'crump' of mortars happened. I couldn't believe it – it was a beautiful morning and you could almost hear the click of the rounds that were being fired. That was the start of the fighting.

The firing lasted about an hour and just as I had set up the roadblock I got a call from one of my NCOs, shouting that we were under attack. I ran across, jumped into the forward trench and we could see people coming through the bush. The range would have been about 500 yards [457 metres] and the platoon in front of us was starting to fire and then everybody was firing. We could see them advancing and I found that I had a Gustav, which had a range of about 90 metres. I gradually took over the Bren gun from my Bren operator, and that fighting lasted about half an hour. You could see them scattering, but they stopped first at 270 metres away. Suddenly they started to stagger and rushed back through the bush. The feeling of elation was fantastic – we'd won our first battle.

It was the first time the lads had been under fire. They were all jittery and they were sometimes firing at anything that moved, which put people in danger. It was difficult to control people but gradually we did. It's amazing how adrenalin keeps you going when you start realising, "Jesus, we're going to be killed here." This had just moved from peacekeeping to peace enforcement.



A battle map of Jadotville drawn by members of A Company while they were in captivity after the siege



Below: A camouflaged two-man trench in Jadotville. Noel Carey fought in defensive positions like this, and on one occasion his camouflage flew off during combat when a UN helicopter circled over at low altitude



Can you describe how you directed mortar fire on 14 September 1961?

The second day was the 'Shock Day' because we came under mortar fire early in the morning. Sean Foley was a brilliant NCO and he spotted a mortar position and called up one of the 60mm mortar crew. We engaged them and after about 30 minutes there was a flash in the enemy area. We don't know what happened or whether we hit their mortars or ammunition or something but the mortar fire died down. We were elated and clapped ourselves on the back.

During the siege what did you do to maintain your platoon's morale?

As an officer you have to maintain their morale as their leader. They have to see that you're concerned about them but also that you're not hiding in a trench while they're out fighting. The fact that I was out in the front trench was an indication that I was putting my life at risk the same as they were.

The heat was tremendous – you're talking about 90-100 degrees [Fahrenheit] and although we had some cover in the trenches it was intense. Then you had flies and dust along with the fact that you're tense and under huge stress. You have to look after your own troops too. Even though you might be afraid and are shaking you still have to be there. It's not 'John Wayne' – it's reality.

You have to overcome fear as a leader and get on with it, but the troops were tremendous. You're talking about lads, the average age was 18, but we also had 16-17 year olds. They were very young and when you see photographs you think, "My God, they were only just children!" But they were fantastic and they learned very fast – they had to.

"I REMEMBER THORS SHAKING MY HAND SAYING, IT'S BETTER THAN DIEN BIEN PHU!"

Do you remember what it was like to be attacked by a Fouga jet fighter?

We had no idea they had their own air force when someone shouted, "Get down!" You could hear the rattle of the machine guns as he strafed our headquarters and there were two loud explosions as the bombs exploded.

It took him an hour to get to Kolwezi to refuel and return so you could maybe judge when he was going to come back. One bomb hit a trench on a machine gun squad and it collapsed in on them. They had to be pulled out but luckily enough they were just shell-shocked. How they were not killed I don't know.

Everything else you could counter, but the problem with the Fouga was that you didn't know where he was coming from and that was pretty scary. We had to work very hard on morale to try and get some of the lads together because it was probably the biggest shock we had.

Can you describe what happened during an incident involving a UN relief helicopter?

Friday was a very difficult day for me in that we were under fire in the forward trench, and at this stage we had had virtually no sleep for about three days. I was in a trench by myself and that was scary because the mortars were falling about all over the place. Religion goes out the door when you're that close to the reality but I said a quick prayer.

We had no water at this stage, our rations were running out and the ammunition was getting low. Somebody shouted that there was another aircraft in the sky and we saw the UN helicopter coming in. Two brave lads went out and put a marker down for it to land. As it came closer the camouflage on my own trench flew off and when we looked up we could see the

rotors of the helicopter just above our heads. I told my platoon sergeant and signaller to get out because if we were mortared the helicopter would be hit.

We then saw the two pilots. One was a Norwegian, Lieutenant Bjorn Hovden, and the other was Warrant Officer Eric Thors, who was Swedish. We got them into our trench and I remember Thors shaking my hand saying, "It's better than Dien Bien Phu!"

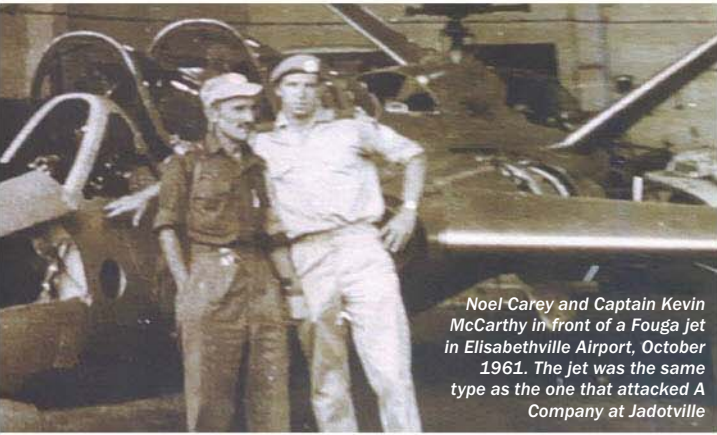
We had ten Jerry cans of water on the helicopter and when there was a lull in the fighting some of the lads were able to get them. However, they were all contaminated. Nobody had cleaned out the cans before they were flown by these very brave pilots. They practically crash-landed onto our position, but for all that the cans were useless.

They had also brought a half-bag of mail. I gingerly put my hand out of the trench and was told I had a letter from Ireland. I thought that was great but when I opened the letter it was a bill from a book company to whom I owed £2!

What was your opinion of the fighting abilities of your enemy, the Katangese gendarmeries and mercenaries?

We were lucky. They were well trained and not a rabble. The assumption was that we were fighting native tribesmen at Jadotville but Katanga was a hugely organised province. They were training troops; they had an air force, paid paratroopers and the gendarmerie. They also had the benefit of about 500 hugely trained and experienced mercenaries. So we were up against a pretty formidable force and their equipment was certainly superior to what we had.

Nonetheless, we didn't see the Katangese as our enemy, it was probably more the mercenaries, but the word 'enemy' didn't arise. It's strange going from peacekeeping to peace enforcement, and it wasn't in our nature to kill anybody. It was never our intention to have



Noel Carey and Captain Kevin McCarthy in front of a Fouga jet in Elisabethville Airport, October 1961. The jet was the same type as the one that attacked A Company at Jadotville



Commandant Pat Quinlan and A Company's radio crew. The range of the Irish troops' radio was limited, with a maximum of 80-97 kilometres in a transmission distance of 144 kilometres

trouble with anybody – certainly not the local populace. However, you do retaliate if people are trying to kill you.

Ceasefire and captivity

What were the circumstances that led to the ceasefire and A Company's reluctant surrender on Sunday 17 September 1961?

By the Saturday night we had no strength on our side at all. I remember Lieutenant Tom Quinlan and myself both realised, "We're in the shite here." We had no more cards to play and what were we going to do? To try and even get everybody back into the trenches – exhausted as everybody was – was going to be a huge problem. So when there was no sign of water being restored on the Sunday and we suddenly saw the Katangese encroaching on our positions there was very little we could do because we'd agreed to a ceasefire. We were totally surrounded, isolated and our relief troops had gone. Pat Quinlan told the Katangan interior minister that the UN would send in aircraft to bomb Jadotville but he replied, "That's not going to happen."

Pat Quinlan called a conference later that evening. The platoon commanders said, "We think we can fight on", but Pat Quinlan had to make the decision in the light of no food, no water, practically no ammunition and no transport to take us back 90 miles. He had to make the decision and that was his decision.

None of us officers wanted to surrender. In fairness to Quinlan he laid out the situation clearly to everybody and when we realised it what could you have done? My own view was that we would have probably lasted another 24 hours before we would have had huge casualties and who was going to relieve us? The rest of the battalions were in trouble in Elisabethville. What we had done was contained quite a number of the Katangese army who would otherwise have been in Elisabethville and caused even more trouble.

A COMPANY'S LIMITED ARSENAL

MOST OF THE WEAPONS USED BY THE UN TROOPS AT JADOTVILLE WERE INADEQUATE AND ANTIQUATED, WITH SOME PRE-DATING WWI

ARMoured CARS

A Company had two Ford Mark VI armoured cars that were homemade in Ireland during WWII and were individually equipped with a Vickers .303 machine gun. This pictured vehicle was photographed at Jadotville with Commandant Pat Quinlan standing beside it.



BREN GUN

Each Irish platoon at Jadotville had three Bren light machine guns. Although the Bren is most famous for its use in British and Commonwealth forces during WWII it was one of the most effective weapons during the siege.



CARL GUSTAV M/45

Officers and some NCOs carried this Swedish sub-machine gun. First developed in 1945, the m/45 fired 600 rounds per minute and had an effective range of 200 metres. Although it is no longer in production the m/45 is still in service with the Swedish Army.



CARL GUSTAV RECOILLESS RIFLE

Among A Company's most formidable weapons were two 84mm Carl Gustav recoilless rifles. Although it resembled a bazooka this anti-tank gun was rifled to stabilise the anti-armour projectiles. It had a range of 548 metres and could fire six rounds per minute.



FN RIFLE

The most common weapon among A Company was the Belgian-produced FN rifle. The FN was a standard, reliable firearm among NATO-aligned countries during the Cold War from the Suez Crisis onwards. However, A Company had previously been using outdated Lee Enfield .303 rifles and only received the FN when they arrived in the Congo.



M19 60MM MORTAR

Six 60mm mortars were used during the siege whose crews were commanded by Sergeant Thomas Kelly in the Support Platoon area. With a barrel length of only 82 centimetres and a range of 732 metres, the mortars were nevertheless A Company's largest artillery pieces.



VICKERS MACHINE GUN

Two Vickers machine guns mounted on tripods were used for sustained fire, with each having an effective range of 914 metres. However, the gun had been designed in 1912 and was extensively used by the British Army during WWI. The armed forces of India and Pakistan still hold many in reserve today.



WEBLEY REVOLVER

Officers and NCOs carried Webley revolvers, which by 1961 were ancient weapons. First introduced in 1887, the Webley was the standard British service revolver of WWI. Although it was a six-shot weapon it had a rate of fire of 25 rounds per minute. Its longevity was remarkable and some Webleys were still in use by the British as late as 1970.



What was your opinion of Commandant Pat Quinlan and his decision?

We were fortunate that we had an excellent commander in Quinlan. He wasn't the perfect man that he's often portrayed as and I had grave difficulties with him. It was very difficult for me because I was a young, inexperienced officer and he demanded the highest standards.

We spent a lot of time doing anti-riot drills and mine was unfortunate in that my platoon could never measure up to Pat Quinlan. I fell foul of him quite a bit so when I had the chance to go off and do patrols in the Congo I nearly jumped at the opportunity just to get away from him! But, when the chips were down and the trouble started he turned out to be a brilliant officer and leader. That's the difference between the personality that you might not like but by God what a commander!

How did it feel to become a prisoner and what were conditions like during your captivity?

It was [a lot] of, "What's going on? Why is this happening to us?" We didn't want this to happen, we fought as best we could and we thought we had won.

There are two instances from captivity that I recall. One was the second morning when we were prisoners and we were in an old, deserted hotel and sleeping on the floor on the first night. In the early hours of the morning we heard a man pulling up on the side of the road. We looked out and we saw a coffin in the back of a Land Rover. The question was, "Was this for one of us?" We had no idea, nobody was telling us what was about to happen. The anxiety grew and after about an hour the Katangese paratroopers came out with a flag and put it over the coffin and off they went.

Then when we went to Kolwezi some of the lads were beaten up on the first night. Some also had grenades in their kitbags and they passed them over to me! I had to find a hiding place in the back of the seats of the buses and get rid of anything they had, because if you were caught they'd beat you up.

Did you witness Pat Quinlan negotiate with Katangan leader Moïse Tshombe while A Company was in captivity?

I did. When Tshombe arrived at the hotel Quinlan gave instructions that we would make Molotov cocktails. They had allowed us to bring our cooking equipment, which included petrol-driven gas fires. We had petrol and we were able to put it into the Molotov cocktails. We stored them in the top of the hotel's roof. If anything happened we had a designated spot where we could use them.

Quinlan did well meeting Tshombe. He told him that we were from the UN peacekeepers and should have freedom of movement. He also said that because we were attacked we should be immediately released, but Tshombe just looked at him and ignored him. He turned on his heels and walked off.

Reflections

In your opinion, what went wrong with the UN's handling of the circumstances surrounding the siege of Jadotville?

Intelligence was the key – the system in the UN was appalling. There was practically no intelligence about the conflict we were going to find ourselves in. We cannot understand who made the decision to send us into Jadotville having had two companies, and then to send one company without any explanation.

Something was amiss, maybe because of a naivety that perhaps the Katangese would easily give in, but it all goes back to intelligence. That's the key in most military actions or situations. If you don't have proper intelligence you're in trouble, and you must know your opposite numbers, what their intentions are and what you need to get right. If you don't know that you're swimming around in a fog.

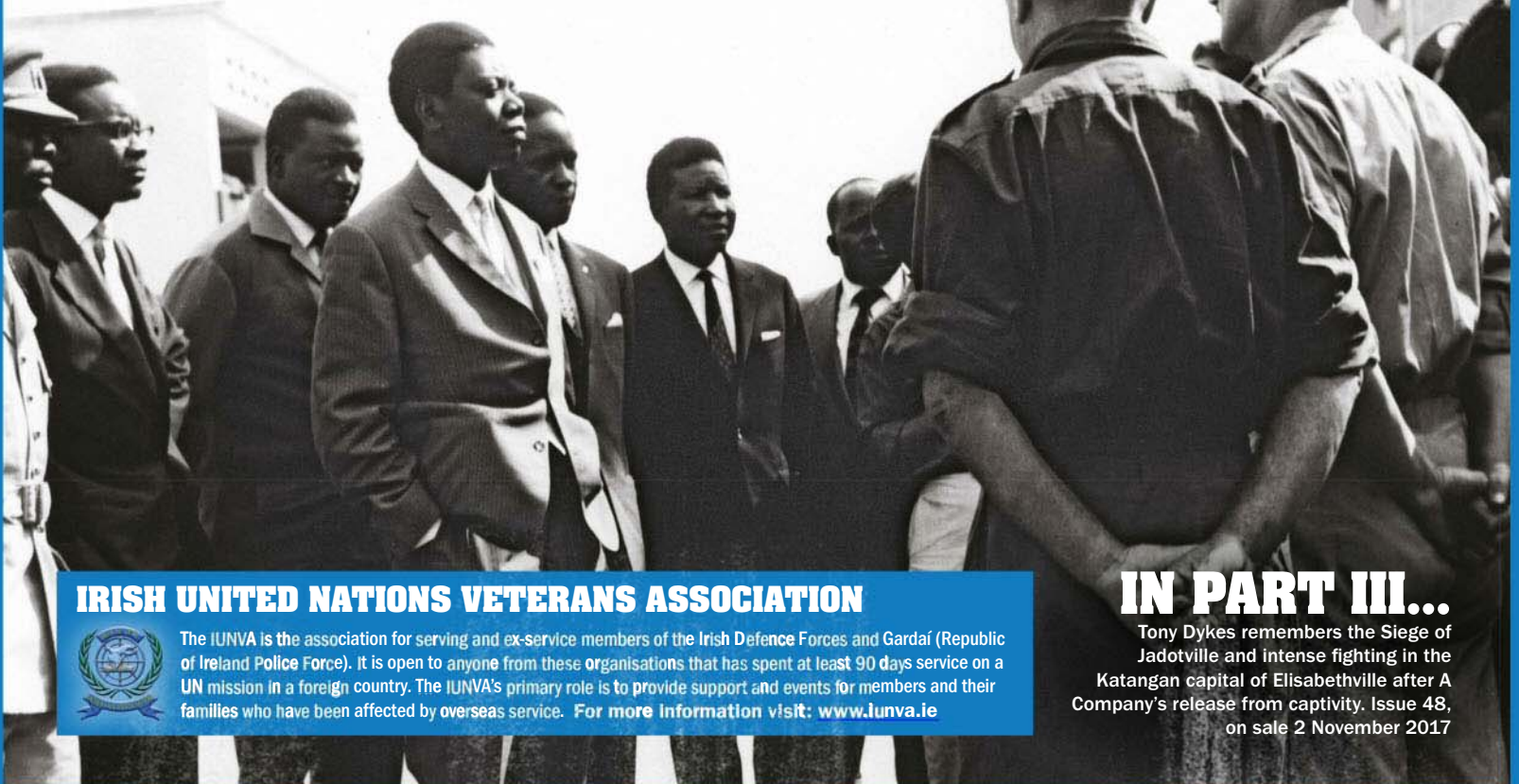
What still needs to be done for the veterans of the campaign today?

In our case the families of the surviving veterans and those who are dead should be recognised. I think the recent proposal for a commemorative medal should be used to promote other conflicts as well. I'd hope that it would be a general medal for bravery of some kind; I think it would be a great gesture.

But there are no recriminations. We insisted – even when the (Netflix) film was being produced – that we would not agree to have anything adverse said about any member of our battalion. The last thing I would want is recriminations, and I would not want to point a finger of blame to anybody about what happened. The only thing I would ask of the UN is why we were sent into Jadotville and not told about Operation Morthor. I would also ask why it took so long to recognise how brave Pat Quinlan was and how he commanded a very brave company who really fought to the best of their abilities.

Below: Katangan leader Moïse Tshombe meets with Commandant Pat Quinlan during A Company's captivity. Quinlan instructed his men to prepare Molotov cocktails in case trouble broke out during the meeting

"WHEN THE CHIPS WERE DOWN AND THE TROUBLE STARTED HE TURNED OUT TO BE A BRILLIANT OFFICER AND LEADER"



Images: Alamy, Noel Carey, Getty, Leo Quinlan

IRISH UNITED NATIONS VETERANS ASSOCIATION



The IUNVA is the association for serving and ex-service members of the Irish Defence Forces and Gardaí (Republic of Ireland Police Force). It is open to anyone from these organisations that has spent at least 90 days service on a UN mission in a foreign country. The IUNVA's primary role is to provide support and events for members and their families who have been affected by overseas service. For more information visit: www.iunva.ie

IN PART III...

Tony Dykes remembers the Siege of Jadotville and intense fighting in the Katangan capital of Elisabethville after A Company's release from captivity. Issue 48, on sale 2 November 2017

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DE HAVILLAND DH98 MOSQUITO

WORDS ROSS SHARPE
AND MIKE HASKEW

The 'mossie' enjoyed superior performance during its service despite initial opposition from the RAF

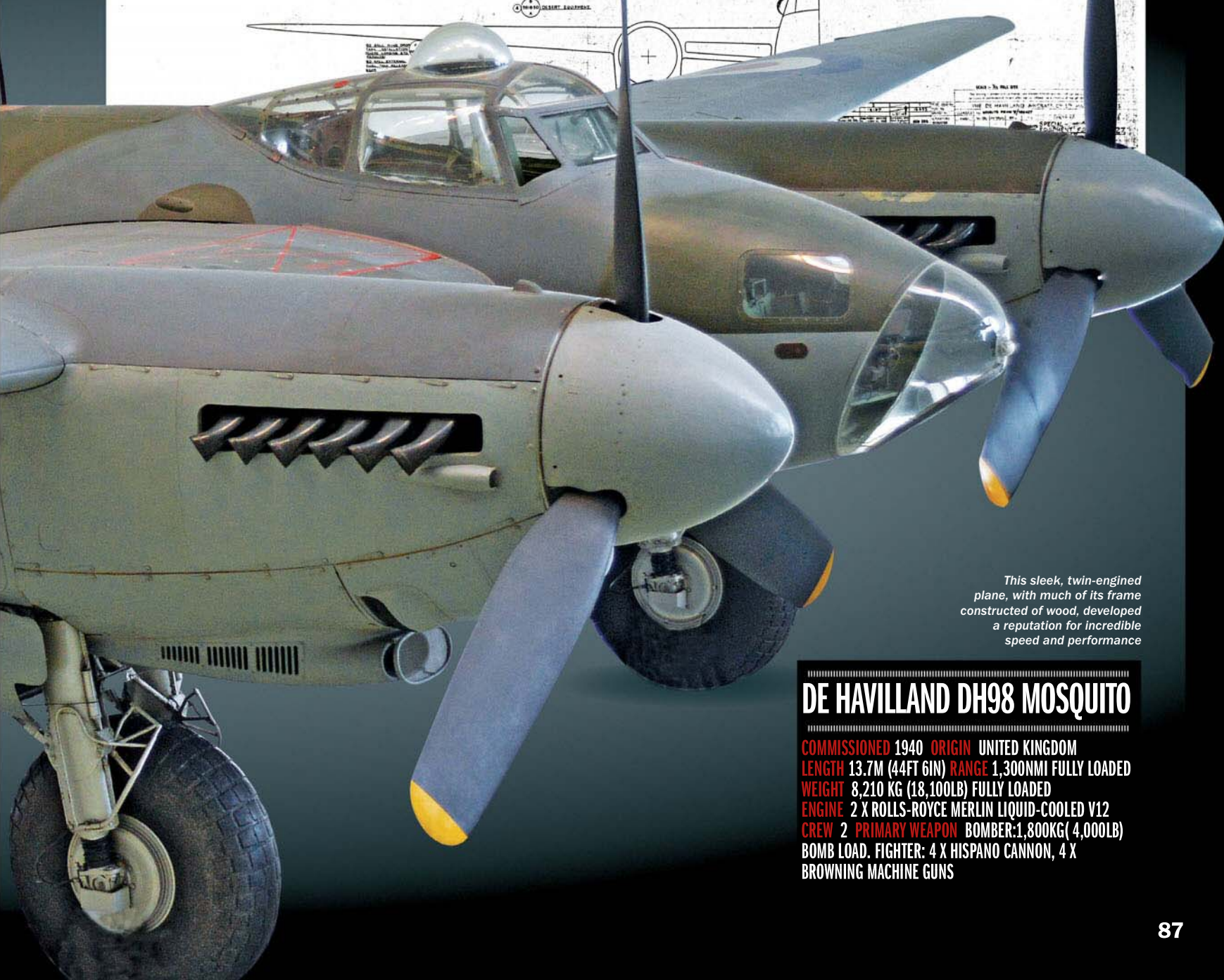
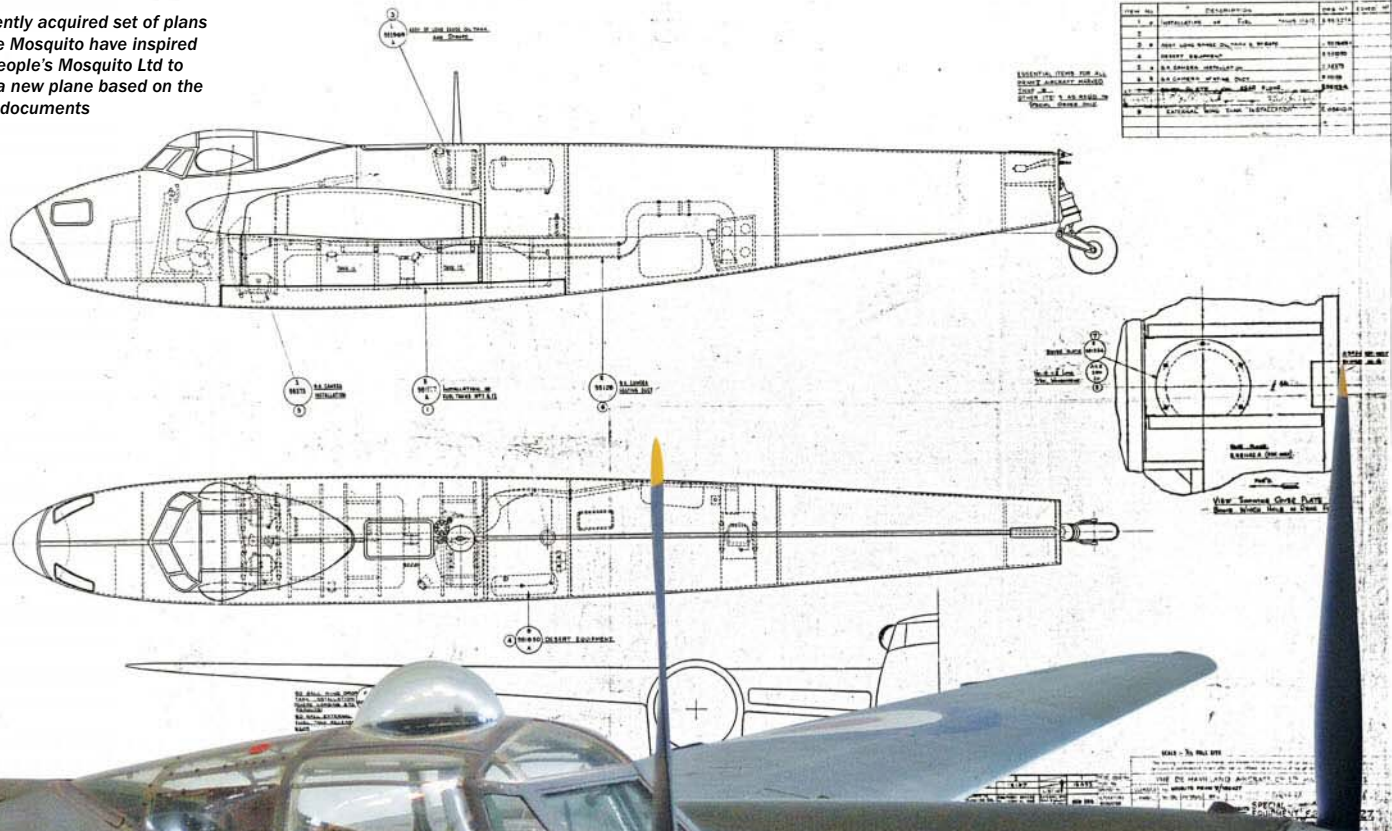
A truly iconic aircraft of WWII, when introduced in 1941 the De Havilland DH98 Mosquito's blend of blazing speed – later versions reached over 400 miles per hour – impressive load-carrying capacity and range meant that it was in demand on all war fronts. 7,781 of these sleek warplanes were built in the UK, Canada and Australia – in fighter, bomber, fighter-bomber, reconnaissance, trainer and many other versions. Unfortunately, there is no Mosquito currently flying in the UK, but The People's Mosquito Ltd, a registered charity, has now acquired over 22,000 production drawings and is beginning the process of rebuilding one.



A flight of Mosquito fighter-bombers. The Mosquito proved a swift and deadly aircraft in multiple roles during WWII

“THE DE HAVILLAND DH98 MOSQUITO’S BLEND OF BLAZING SPEED – LATER VERSIONS REACHED OVER 400MPH – IMPRESSIVE LOAD-CARRYING CAPACITY AND RANGE MEANT THAT IT WAS IN DEMAND ON ALL WAR FRONTS”

A recently acquired set of plans for the Mosquito have inspired The People's Mosquito Ltd to build a new plane based on the WWII documents

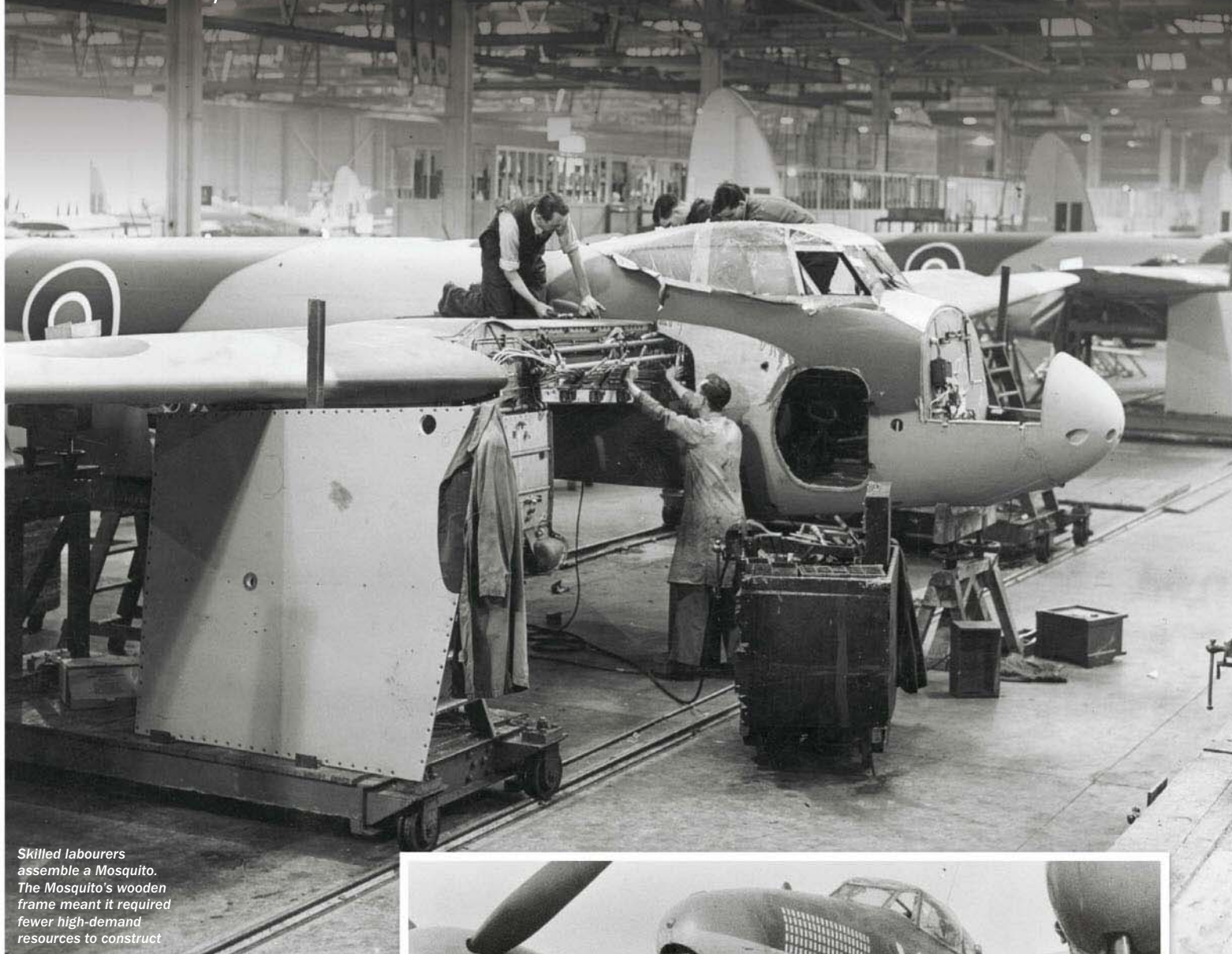


This sleek, twin-engined plane, with much of its frame constructed of wood, developed a reputation for incredible speed and performance

DE HAVILLAND DH98 MOSQUITO

COMMISSIONED 1940 **ORIGIN** UNITED KINGDOM
LENGTH 13.7M (44FT 6IN) **RANGE** 1,300NMI FULLY LOADED
WEIGHT 8,210 KG (18,100LB) FULLY LOADED
ENGINE 2 X ROLLS-ROYCE MERLIN LIQUID-COOLED V12
CREW 2 **PRIMARY WEAPON** BOMBER:1,800KG (4,000LB)
BOMB LOAD. FIGHTER: 4 X HISPANO CANNON, 4 X BROWNING MACHINE GUNS

“DE HAVILLAND PROPOSED A RADICAL SOLUTION – TWO OF THE NEW ROLLS-ROYCE MERLIN ENGINES, A SLEEK WOODEN AIRFRAME OF SPRUCE AND BIRCH ATTACHED TO STEEL TUBING, A CREW OF TWO AND NO DEFENSIVE ARMAMENT”



Skilled labourers assemble a Mosquito. The Mosquito's wooden frame meant it required fewer high-demand resources to construct

DESIGN

Sir Geoffrey de Havilland and his design team were the masters of speed in wooden aircraft. Their tiny DH88 Comet had won the 1934 England to Australia air race, and the DH91 Albatross airliner cut the London to Paris time to one hour. In 1936 the Air Ministry issued a specification for a new bomber: in response, De Havilland proposed a radical solution – two of the new Rolls-Royce Merlin engines, a sleek wooden airframe of spruce and birch attached to steel tubing, a crew of two and no defensive armament. Born in secrecy at Salisbury Hall, outside of London, the Mosquito would change the shape of air combat in World War II. Opposed by some inside the RAF, the aircraft was championed by Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfrid Freeman, so much so that it was known as 'Freeman's Folly'.



A pilot and crewman look on as another successful bombing run is recorded. The Mosquito was a challenge to fly at low speed and required an experienced pilot

ENGINE

Variants of the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine were utilised throughout the production run of the De Havilland Mosquito, which spanned the decade from 1940 – 1950. The standard Merlin was a liquid-cooled V12 piston aircraft engine that was developed in the early 1930s, first run in autumn 1933 and first flown in the Hawker Hart biplane light bomber on 21 February 1935. The Merlin delivered 1,100 horsepower and powered numerous Allied aircraft during World War II in addition to the Mosquito, including RAF mainstays such as the Supermarine Spitfire and Hawker Hurricane fighters and the Avro Lancaster heavy bomber. Perhaps its most famous pairing occurred with the American-built North American P-51 Mustang fighter. Production of the Merlin ceased in 1950 after around 160,000 engines had been completed. The Packard V-1650 was a licence-built Merlin produced in the United States.

“THE MERLIN DELIVERED 1,100 HORSEPOWER AND POWERED NUMEROUS ALLIED AIRCRAFT DURING WORLD WAR II”

The exhaust pipes from one of two Rolls-Royce Merlin engines is visible in this modern photo as a Mosquito taxis before flight

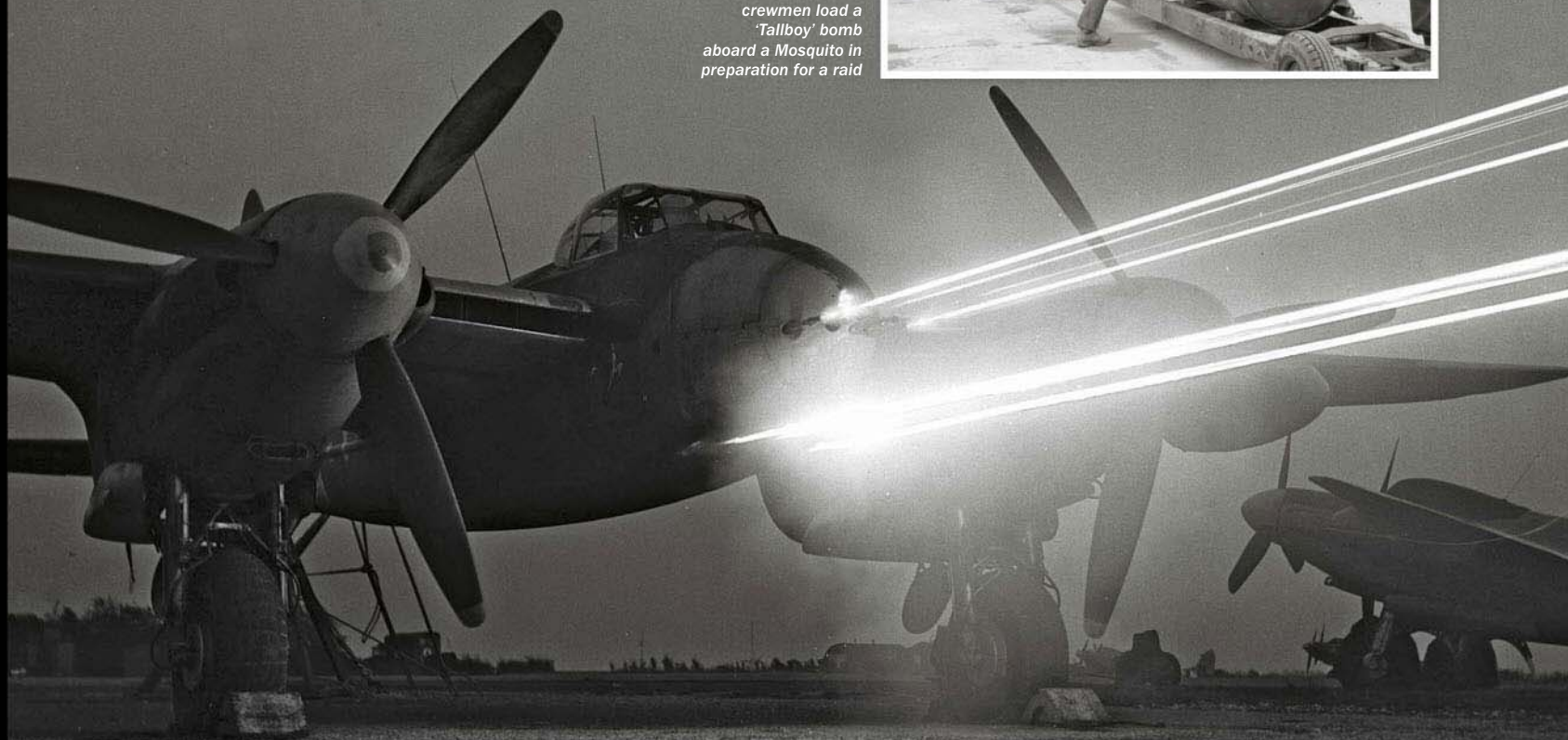


A worker adjusts the position of a Merlin engine during construction. Merlin engines were used in several aircraft during WWII



“THE FIERCEST MOSQUITO WAS THE FB.XVIII, WHICH HEFTED A MASSIVE 6 POUND GUN DESIGNED TO DESTROY U-BOATS AND OTHER TARGETS”

Right: Ground crewmen load a 'Tallboy' bomb aboard a Mosquito in preparation for a raid

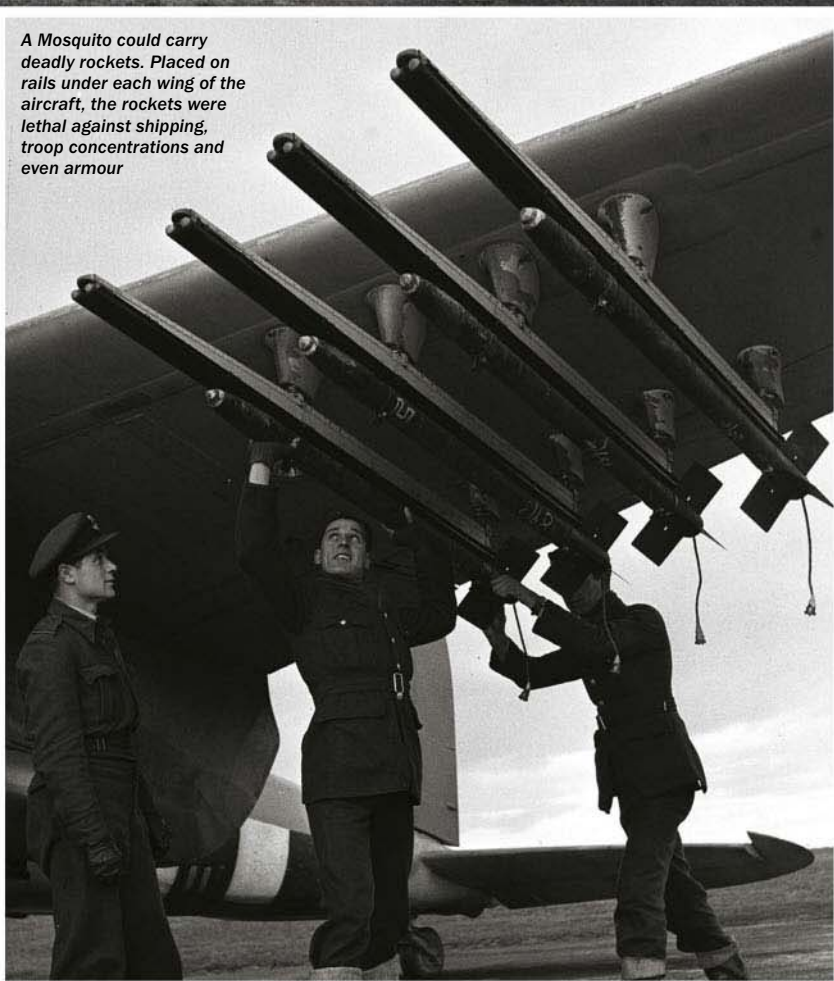


During a firing exercise, possibly to 'sight' its weapons accurately, tracer bullets are fired from the nose

ARMAMENT

Originally specified to carry a 1,000 pound bomb load, this was doubled before the aircraft entered service by cropping the tails of standard British 500 pound bombs so that four of these could fit in the bomb bay. Later, B. Mk IV bombers were given bulged bomb bay doors, allowing RAF Bomber Command to send them on night raids all the way to Berlin carrying a 4,000 pound HC bomb – the famous 'cookie'. The initial night fighter versions carried four .303 Brownings and four 20mm Hispano cannon, but the machine guns were later omitted when bulkier centrimetric radar was fitted. The all-rounder was the FB.VI, with the ability to carry two 500 pound bombs internally, two 500 pound under the wings or eight 60 pound rocket projectiles, as well as a full gun armament. The fiercest Mosquito was the FB.XVIII, which hefted a massive 6 pound gun designed to destroy U-boats and naval targets.

A Mosquito could carry deadly rockets. Placed on rails under each wing of the aircraft, the rockets were lethal against shipping, troop concentrations and even armour



THE PEOPLE'S MOSQUITO

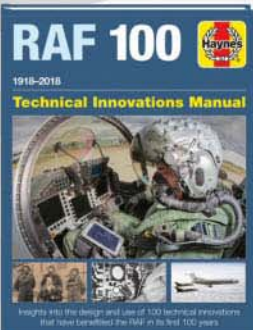
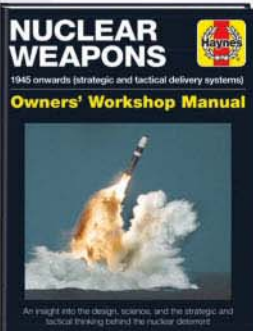
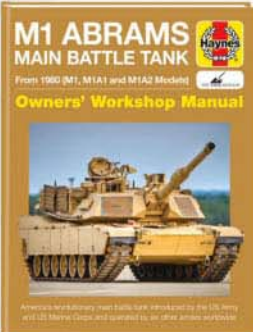
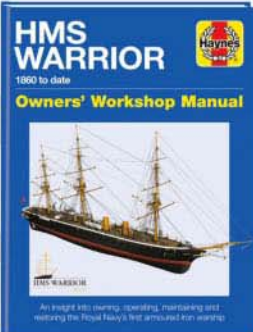
The People's Mosquito is a registered charity with the sole aim of restoring and returning a UK-based DH98 Mosquito to British skies. Once RL249 is flying, the charity will maintain and operate the restored aircraft, funded by public donation and sponsorship, with the intention of providing many hours of flying displays every year for the people of the United Kingdom. For more information and to donate, please visit: www.peoplesmosquito.org.uk



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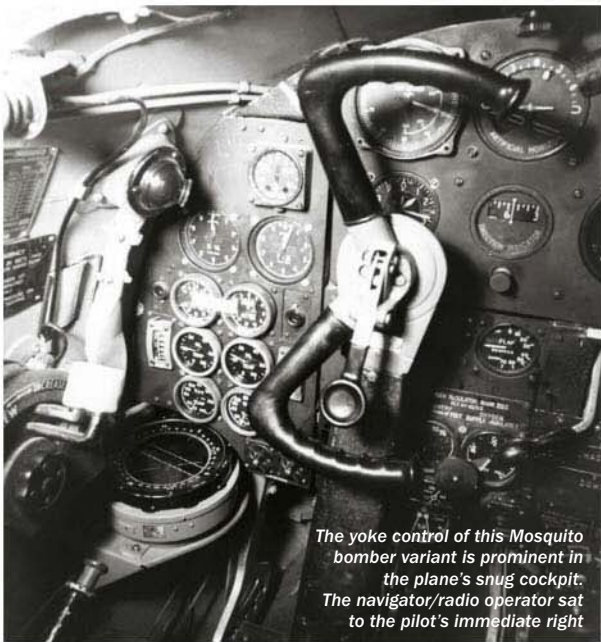


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The yoke control of this Mosquito bomber variant is prominent in the plane's snug cockpit. The navigator/radio operator sat to the pilot's immediate right

COCKPIT

The De Havilland Mosquito operated with a two-man crew, seated side by side in the cockpit with the pilot on the left and navigator/radar operator on the right. The radar display was located on the upper right, while the pilot's controls were distributed at eye level and to his left side. The elevator trim wheel and indicator, along with the throttle and prop levers, were positioned on the left side of the fuselage. The fighter-bomber and fighter versions were controlled with a stick, while the bomber variant was piloted with a yoke. The airspeed indicator, horizon and vertical speed indicator were positioned left to right across the top of the instrument panel. The altimeter and compass were just below, while the landing gear and flap indicator were centred beneath. A trio of prominent levers to the pilot's right operated the bomb bay doors, landing gear and flaps.

SERVICE HISTORY

THE MOSSIE WAS IN HIGH DEMAND AND PROVED A HIGHLY VERSATILE AIRCRAFT IN MULTIPLE ROLES THROUGHOUT THE WAR

The unarmed Mosquito was first fielded by the No 1 Photo Reconnaissance Unit at RAF Benson in July 1941, but night fighters (NF.II) and bombers (B. Mk IV) quickly followed. No 105 Squadron and other units in Bomber Command developed pinpoint accuracy in daring, low-level strikes against German targets, including the Gestapo HQ in Oslo, and this was carried on by the FB.VI fighter-bombers of No 2

Group with attacks like the famous Amiens Prison raid on 18 February 1944. Mosquitos of 100 Group savaged the German night fighter force, while Coastal Command Mosquitoes were sinking Axis shipping off the Norwegian coast. The Mosquito would go on to serve in many other countries after the war.

Perhaps more Mosquitos were lost to accidents than enemy action during World War II. The plane was a challenge to fly – even for experienced pilots – but while it was somewhat sluggish at lower airspeeds its performance improved dramatically as the aircraft approached 350 miles per hour. In capable hands the 'mossie' enjoyed a performance advantage over other planes throughout its service life.



Mosquitos were effective at low-level strikes because of their speed and range



Mossies conducted strategic raids on high-value targets across Europe



The railway at Trier, Germany, under attack by six Mosquito B.IVs



The pilot of this Mosquito was able to bring his damaged aircraft home. Note the evidence of the aircraft's wood construction on the splintered wing

REVIEWS

Our pick of the latest military history books

WOMEN WARRIORS

Author: Tracey-Ann Knight **Publisher:** Amberley Publishing **Price:** £20.00

TRACEY-ANN KNIGHT FILLS THE STARK VOID OF FEMALE MILITARY HISTORY

There are plenty of War heroes throughout history, but until now comparatively little has been said about women who have fought alongside male combat troops. Tracey-Ann Knight rectifies this by bringing to light the experiences of ten women who, throughout the history of warfare, rejected the limits that military society placed on them. The women in this book fought, slept, grumbled and caroused alongside their fellow soldiers, without discovery, over various periods of time, for weeks or even decades.

The author, who happens to be a soldier's wife, travelled across Europe to research the stories of these extraordinary women and explore the concept of the female warrior. "Literature, plays and popular ballads, dating as far back as the 16th century, have all celebrated the tales and legends of women soldiers, sailors, heroines and goddesses," she said. Yet even in World War II, when the role of women became more necessary than ever, the 'combat tattoo' that prevented them from crossing into the battlefield was still strongly enforced. In fact, it was over 70 years after that conflict before the British military finally allowed women to serve on the frontline.

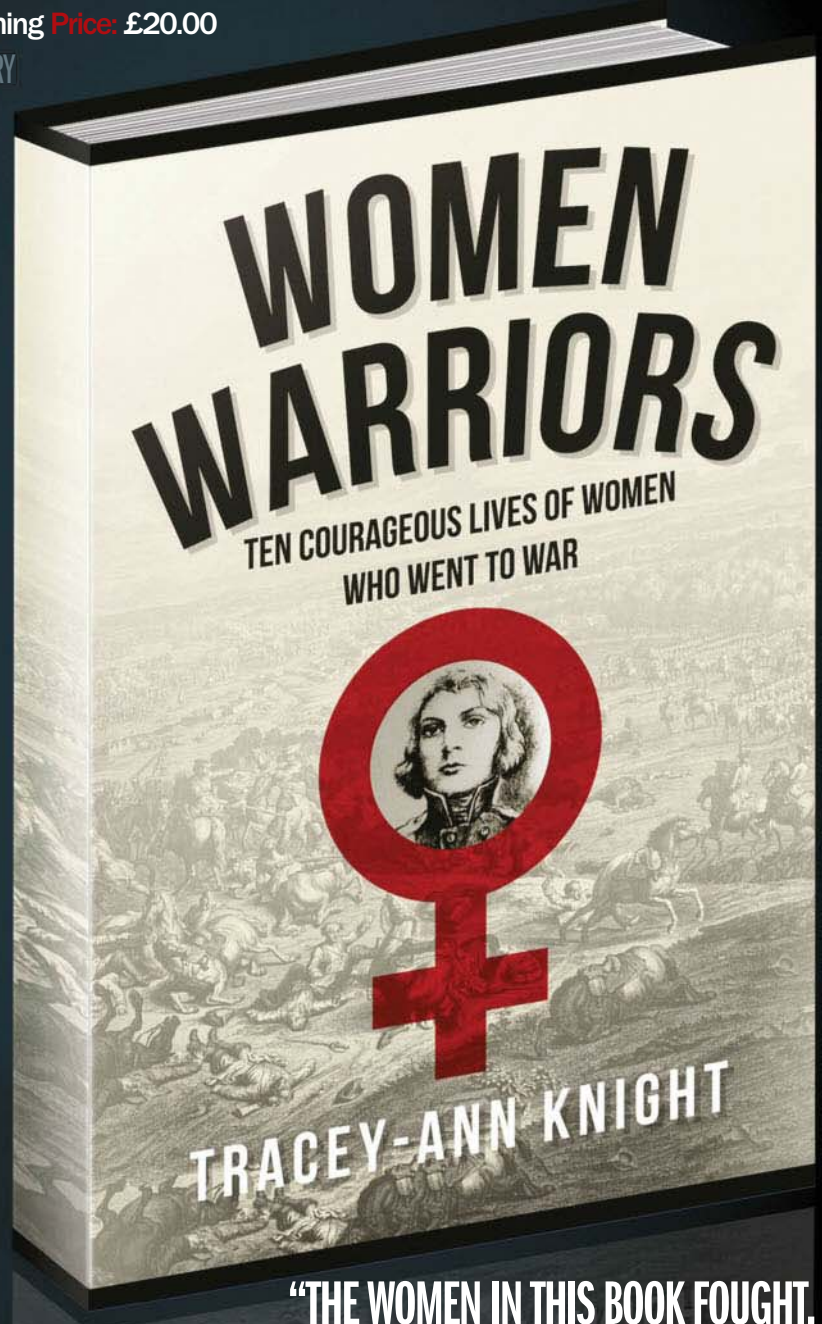
Not all of the women warriors we meet in this book are best described as 'angels in uniform'. Mary Read, who went by the pseudonym Mark Read, is presented as "the female pirate of the Caribbean." Born an illegitimate daughter of a widow in London at the end of the 17th century, Read took to the life of a pirate, before accepting an offer of clemency from King George I. She exchanged piracy for the settled life of a landlubber on the island of Nassau – but not for long. In 1717, Read ventured off into another new career – that of pirate hunter, which the British government rewarded with large sums of money.

But Read was soon up to her old buccaneering tricks. She was eventually captured and sentenced to death, but managed to escape the gallows, as she had fallen pregnant along the way. Under English law, a pregnant woman could not be executed. Nevertheless, it was to be a short reprieve, as she died of a fever in 1721.

A more congenial character is Loreta Janeta Velázquez, known as Lieutenant Harry T. Budford, who fought with Confederate troops in the American Civil War. Velázquez was on the frontline, disguised in a false beard and moustache, at Bull Run in 1861 – the war's first major battle. Cuban-born Velázquez published her memoirs in 1876, in which she claimed to have raised her own troops and undertaken dangerous missions as a Confederate spy.

She was a great admirer of Joan of Arc, arguably the most celebrated female soldier in history. The reliability of her much embellished autobiography is a matter of speculation, however – she even claimed to have met President Lincoln. In fact, as Knight points out, her whole person may have been a fabrication.

Letting that pass, the story of Velázquez and the other pioneering women whose lives are explored here makes for a fascinating and well-documented read.



"THE WOMEN IN THIS BOOK FOUGHT, SLEPT, GRUMBLED AND CAROUSED ALONGSIDE THEIR FELLOW SOLDIERS, WITHOUT DISCOVERY"

HOW TO READ EUROPEAN ARMOR

Author: Donald J. La Rocca **Publisher:** Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York **Price:** £16.99

THE ART CONNOISSEUR'S GUIDE TO ARMOUR FROM ACROSS THE CENTURIES

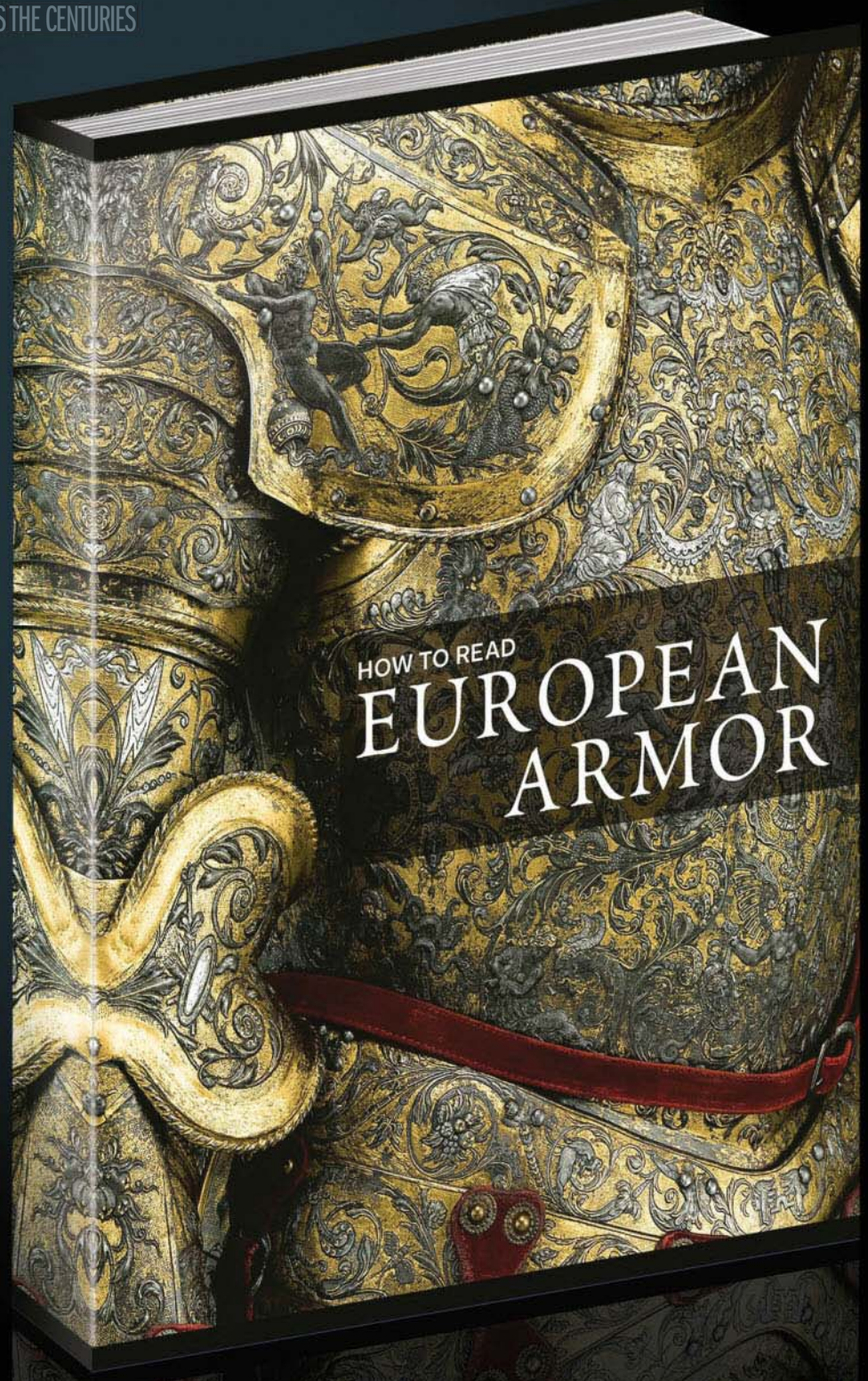
This is a book that is full of clues and cues to enable the reader to better understand armour. Published by the Met – the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York – it is the latest in a series of impressive 'How to Read' books. Previous volumes include *How to read Chinese Paintings* and *How to read Greek Vases*. This is very much a book for the cultured connoisseur of European armour. Indeed, the author, Donald J. La Rocca, is the curator of the Met's collection of armour.

With its exquisitely reproduced photographs of notable pieces of armour, it's a book that will reside very well on the most tasteful of coffee tables. But it's more than just a book with beautiful pictures. The text reveals La Rocca's deep scholarly appreciation of his field, particularly within the context of arms as art. This is a book for the collector rather than the re-enactor.

Its great virtue is to highlight to the reader the dual function of armour. We all know that armour protected the knight, but La Rocca and the illustrations place vividly in front of the reader how the 'knight in shining armour' of legend was also a man displaying power and prestige, and nowhere more so than in the armour of the great and powerful.

As befits the Met's superb collection of armour from the 15th – 17th centuries, the book focuses on the supreme examples of the armourer's craft, as revealed in such pieces as the gauntlets of Philip II of Spain or the shield of Henry II of France. In these, the armourer marries form and function to an extraordinary degree, providing both superb protection for the royal personage, while also signalling his status to the men around him on the battlefield – for this was still a time when kings were expected to take to the field.

In keeping with the expertise of its writer, the book also reveals to the reader the subtle clues that enable someone like the curator of the Met's armour collection to tell whether the item he is looking at is a genuine example of 16th-century armour, a cobbled together collection of disparate pieces of armour hung on to a mannequin, or an actual forgery, most likely made in the latter part of the 19th century, when the rebirth of interest in all things medieval created a market for fake and forged armour. Even though La Rocca reveals what he looks for when assessing armour, this reviewer suspects it would take many years of careful study to arrive at the disciplined aesthetic vision that allows this level of discrimination. This sort of appreciation does not come cheap – it requires years of study. But La Rocca is generous with his dearly bought knowledge, and by the end of the book the reader will have a far deeper understanding of the form and function of European armour.



TALES OF VALOUR

WORDS TOM GARNER

Speaking ahead of their appearance at the Raworths Harrogate Literature Festival, Peter Snow CBE and his wife Ann MacMillan discuss their new book about individual acts of heroism and humanity during conflicts

WHAT WAS THE IDEA BEHIND *WAR STORIES*, AND WHOSE IDEA WAS IT TO CO-WRITE THE BOOK?

PS: Our publisher said to me, "You should do some more military writing. How about doing it about 50 battles?" and I said, "Well, we could do but I like writing about people." Ann then came into it. What came out of it were 34 people in all sorts of wars. They're people who make a special and extraordinary contribution to battles and just being in wartime. They're not all battlefield stories. Some are involved in war, and a third of our people are women: not just nurses but also spies. We also did interviews with people who are still living.

AM: I said to Peter, "Why don't you follow an individual through a war or battle that you want to talk about?" When he went to the publisher and suggested it they loved the idea. They asked if I would be interested in co-authoring it. We decided to tell the stories of the battles through a single person that was involved.

AS A GREAT-GRANDDAUGHTER OF DAVID LLOYD-GEORGE, DID THAT GIVE YOU AN INTEREST IN HISTORY, OR WERE THERE OTHER INFLUENCES?

AM: We were always brought up at home on stories about our grandparents, and in my case my great-grandparents. My mum was a proud Welshwoman, but she was also very

proud to be British. She went to Canada in 1939 but told and read us wonderful stories, and we were brought up on King Alfred burning the cakes and Boudicca, so it's a family thing.

HOW MUCH HAS YOUR FAMILY'S MILITARY BACKGROUND AND OWN CAREER INFLUENCED YOUR MILITARY HISTORY BOOKS?

PS: My grandfather and father were military people, and I had two years in the army myself. But I think what got me going was just studying when I went to school. I was particularly excited by ancient history, so I spent my time at school and university doing that. History always fascinated me. Also, as a journalist, you cover a battle or an event and your deadline is that night. But now that I've packed up doing journalism, the joy is now being able to go back and chew over events in huge depth – looking at primary sources and so on. That makes it so much more satisfying and fulfilling.

DOES IT CHANGE THE DYNAMIC OF A PARTICULAR WAR STORY WHEN YOU INTERVIEW THE SUBJECT IN PERSON?

AM: Meeting someone who is a war hero or has gone through something is very moving, but we tried to remain objective about it and treat it as we had all the other subjects.

PS: One of the chaps we talked to who is still alive is Corran Purdon. He's 96 and went to Saint-Nazaire as a commando to bash up the dry dock in 1942. He is such a wonderful old guy. In many ways his whole life has been totally obsessed with this extraordinary event, and he told the story in such a vivid way. There's nothing like meeting someone who has actually done it – it's fascinating.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE STORY FROM THE BOOK?

AM: Butch O'Hare. He's a Second World War naval air ace who became a hero because he shot down many Japanese planes in the South Pacific. His back-story was fascinating because his father was a crooked lawyer who worked with Al Capone and was desperate to get Butch into a good military academy. He led the American authorities to Capone's accountant, and Capone was found guilty of tax evasion. So he opened the books on Capone and Butch got into Annapolis Naval Academy and went on to be this ace flyer. His dad was mowed down on the streets of Chicago by Capone's men, and poor old Butch died in the South Pacific – it was a fascinating series of events.

PS: My favourite was a chap called Franz von Werra, a German Luftwaffe pilot who was one of the very few people who escaped from British prisoner-of-war camps. He was over here, escaped from the Lake District camp, then escaped from a camp down near Derby and went to an RAF airfield, said he was a Polish pilot and asked for a Hurricane to fly back to base in Scotland. He was nicked at the last moment by the RAF station officer. The British kicked him off to Canada and he walked across the frozen St. Lawrence River into neutral America in 1941 – before they joined the war – and managed to get back to Germany. It's an unbelievable story.

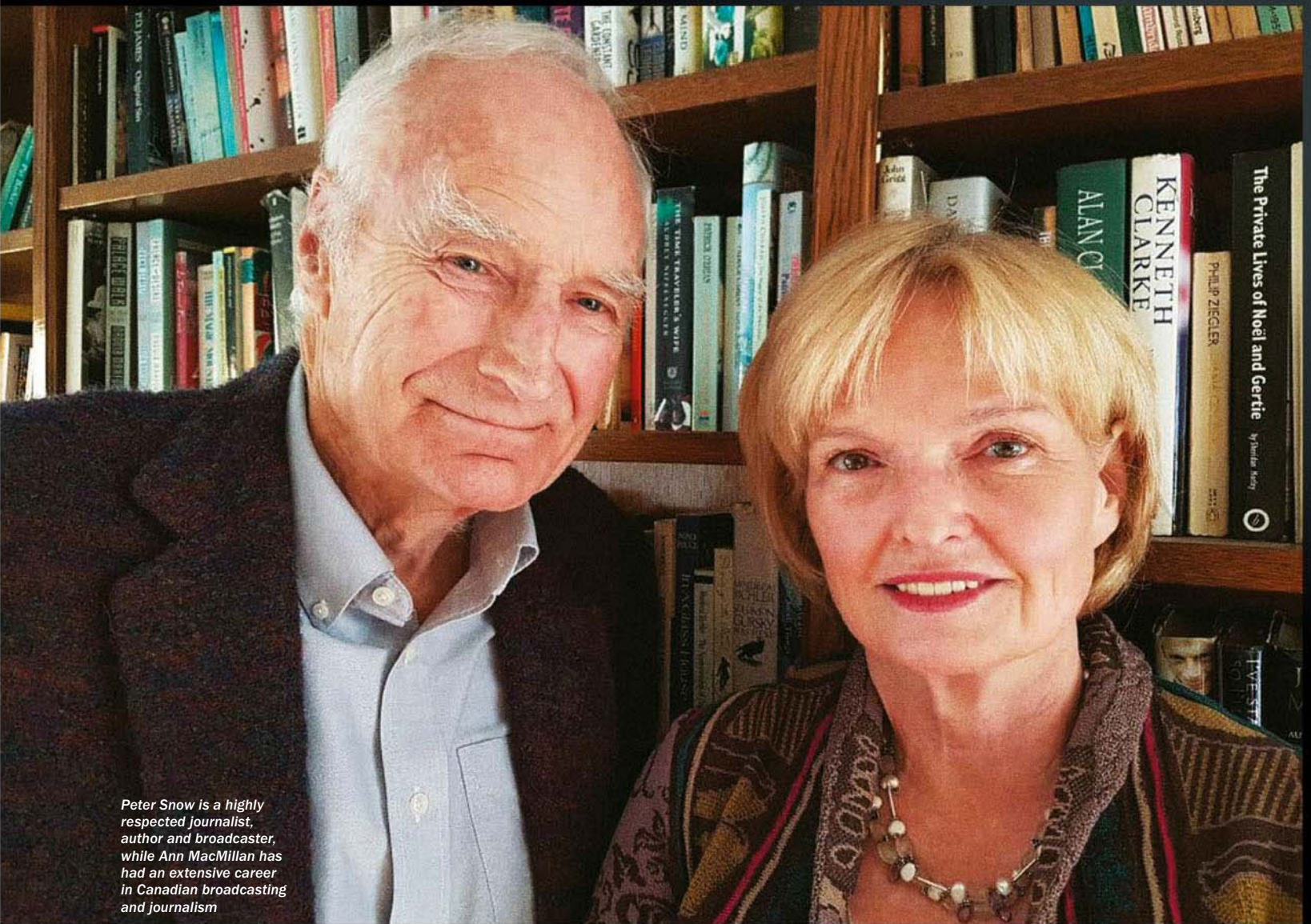
WHAT IS IT ABOUT CONFLICT THAT CREATES COMPELLING STORIES?

PS: I think the answer is very simple. The history and map of the world is shaped by battles that were fought in the past and even possibly – I pray not – battles that will be fought in the

Below: Despite his father's connections to Al Capone, O'Hare became the US Navy's first flying ace and was also its first recipient of the Medal of Honor during WWII

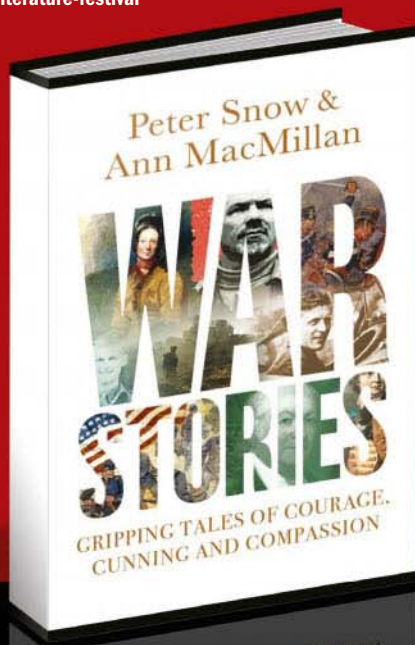


"HIS DAD WAS MOWED DOWN ON THE STREETS OF CHICAGO BY CAPONE'S MEN AND POOR OLD BUTCH DIED IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC"



Peter Snow is a highly respected journalist, author and broadcaster, while Ann MacMillan has had an extensive career in Canadian broadcasting and journalism

War Stories is published by John Murray Publishers and is on sale now. Peter Snow and Ann MacMillan will be talking about their book at Raworths Harrogate Literature Festival on Thursday 19 October 2017. For more information visit: www.harrogateinternationalfestivals.com/raworths-literature-festival



“THE BRITISH KICKED HIM OFF TO CANADA AND HE WALKED ACROSS THE FROZEN ST. LAWRENCE RIVER INTO NEUTRAL AMERICA IN 1941 – BEFORE THEY JOINED THE WAR – AND MANAGED TO GET BACK TO GERMANY. IT’S AN UNBELIEVABLE STORY”

future. One of the things I enjoyed very much was encountering a primary source of one of the lads who went into battle at Vimeiro back in 1808. None of us who have not fought in a war know what it would be like in a battle, but he went into it thinking, “I’ve got to run for it.” But he stood there in the line and looked along at the redcoats next to him at his left and right and saw the grim determination on their faces, and he just knew. He just felt somehow that he was with them and that he couldn’t possibly run away and just went and fought with them. It was brilliant.

AM: I think that people either rise to the occasion or they don’t, and that’s one of the things we were quite fascinated by. If we were in a battle, would we rush in and go into Saint-Nazaire and jump out of a boat, or would we cower in a corner somewhere? That really does

separate the men from the boys, the women from the girls. It just makes some people behave in ways they probably never imagined they were capable of.

Right: Franz von Werra was a German flying ace and POW during WWII. He is believed to be the only Axis prisoner to escape from Canadian custody, before returning to Germany



Images: Getty

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FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE'S LAMP



Although it heavily defined her iconic image, Florence Nightingale's lamp was a simple Turkish paper lantern.

This unassuming but remarkable lantern from the Crimean War is intimately linked with the legendary Victorian nurse

Florence Nightingale is the most famous figure to have emerged from the Crimean War (1853-56). Unique in military history, her role in improving the lives of wounded soldiers overshadowed any achievements by generals on the battlefield, and she is widely regarded as the founder of modern nursing.

Nightingale trained as a nurse in Germany, and answered a government appeal for nurses after reading newspaper accounts of British soldiers suffering in the Crimea. Having been appointed 'Superintendent of the Female Nurses in the Hospitals in the East', Nightingale arrived at the Military Hospital at Scutari in Turkey, November 1854, with a small staff. Conditions were dire, with a lack of basic equipment and provisions, and the hospital was dirty and vermin-ridden. Despite doctors' objections, Nightingale and her nurses improved medical arrangements, set up washed clothes and linen, installed food kitchens and reading rooms, and wrote letters for soldiers. This work transformed the public image of nursing, and turned it into a respectable profession.

Unfortunately, death rates at Scutari increased to 42 per cent by February 1855 because of a damaged sewer, but Nightingale's comforting role was a huge morale boost for her patients and the war effort. The *Times* newspaper reported that she would walk around the hospital beds at night to check the wounded men, and one of the lamps she used was this paper lantern. Nightingale's fame was assured when the popular poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow immortalised her in the poem 'Santa Filomena', a work that popularised the pioneering nurse's reputation as 'The Lady with the Lamp'.



Above: Nightingale was a champion of ordinary soldiers, and continually wrote after the Crimean War, "I stand at the altar of murdered men and while I live I will fight their cause."

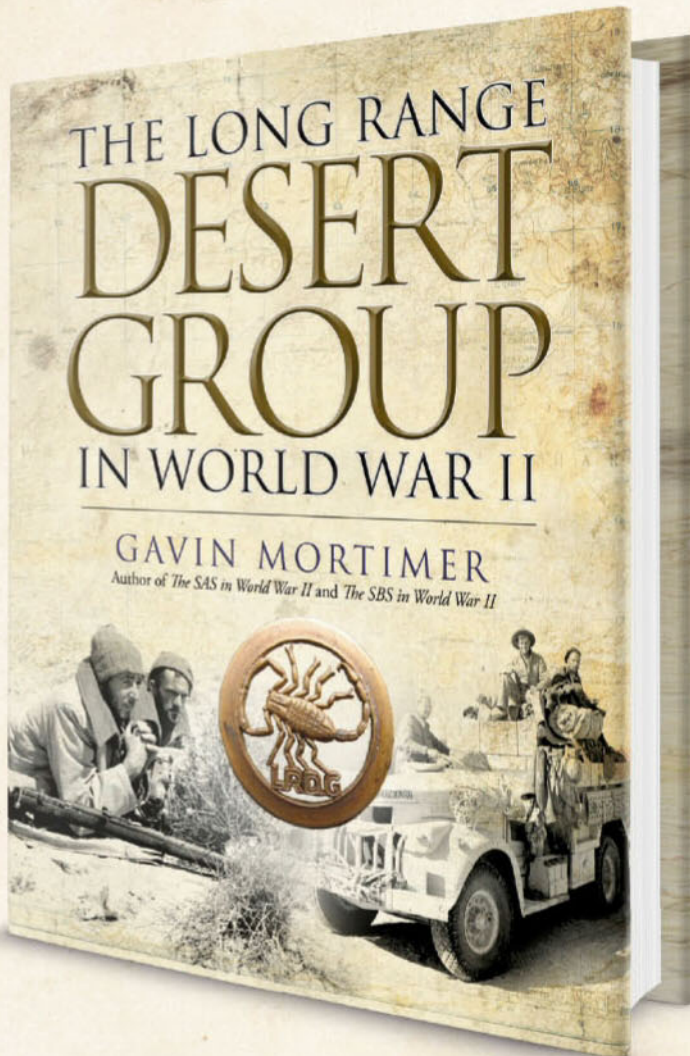
"HER ROLE IN IMPROVING THE LIVES OF WOUNDED SOLDIERS OVERSHADOWED ANY ACHIEVEMENTS BY GENERALS ON THE BATTLEFIELD"

Image: National Army Museum

NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM

Florence Nightingale's lamp is on display in the newly reopened National Army Museum in Chelsea, London. The museum is open daily from 10.30am-5.30pm (8pm on the first Wednesday of every month).

For more information visit: www.nam.ac.uk

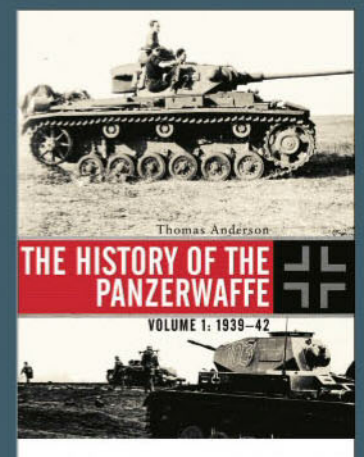
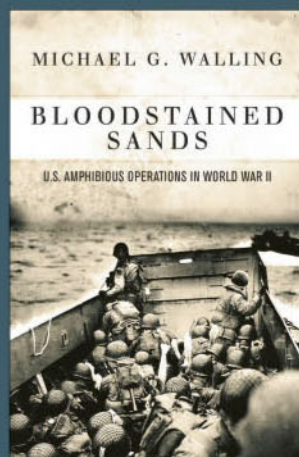
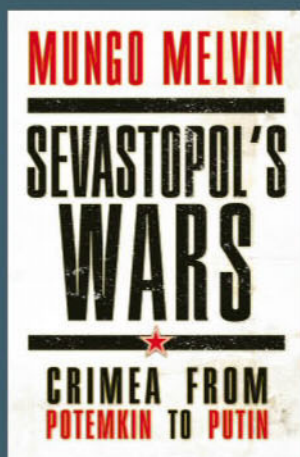


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